SLIGHTLY DRUNK ON WONDER

By Patrick Costello

For Aunt Mannie

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I love you.

—P

Introduction

Well, hello there.

It's okay. You can say hello right back. Silently in your mind or out loud to startle people around you. Don't worry if somebody might hear. To be honest, some of the most interesting conversations I have ever had were with people talking to themselves on the bus or subway.

We are meeting in an unusual way. I am writing in my world and now, miles and years away, as you are reading, your mind will conjure its own version of my voice.

That's the astonishing thing about reading and writing. We will likely never meet, but we are now connected. You might not hear the thick Philadelphia Delco accent of my speaking voice, but you are hearing me just the same. By writing, I have set things into motion like a pebble tossed into a still pond. The ripples never truly stop.

Now comes the question of why. Why am I writing this? Why are you reading?

I am writing because I want to share an observation with you. Not some gospel or great truth— just an observation. Something I picked up as a child, it has guided me through my long life.

Your reasons for reading my words are your own.

My observation is this: you are surrounded by wonder.

Every second of your life, you are surrounded by amazing things. Beauty and horror. Sunshine and shadow. There is not one moment, from your greatest achievement to your most harrowing defeat, that does not contain countless things that, if you stop long enough to see, will leave you staggering—slightly drunk on wonder.

Don't believe me? Just step outside and look around. Wherever you live, in the city or in the rural countryside, there is life moving around you. People are moving about chasing hopes and dreams. Wildlife is going about its business, from urban pigeons to herds of deer, to the silent growth of grass out in the field or forcing its way through cracks in the sidewalk.

Even you are a miracle if you sit still long enough to really take yourself in.

It's easy to scoff at the idea you might be special. From birth, we find ourselves under constant comparison and critique. As children, the people who raise us tend to program us with their views of the world. As a result, many of us grow to see ourselves as less than we truly are. We end up rushing about trying to fit in and please people and, as a result, we lose ourselves.

We are strangers right now, but I can tell you honestly and with full confidence that you are amazing. From the creation of the universe eons ago to right now, there has never been anybody like you. There will never be anybody like you.

I am a musician who just happens to be almost as deaf as a post. In the forty years I was playing and teaching around the world, people would watch me perform and say that it was easy for me, using "magical thinking" words like talent to explain my music away. As if I woke up one day and took up the banjo and country blues guitar with no effort.

The comedy is that I was godawful when I started. I was so terrible in the beginning that my attempts at music were so clumsily toneless that it started to kill my neighbor's lawn. Conductive hearing loss forced me to use my teeth to hear my instruments, with the vibrations rattling through my skull to

reach the auditory nerves. Learning disabilities made sight-reading written music almost impossible. Lack of coordination made fretting or striking strings clumsy and out of time. I became proficient and eventually mastered my craft because, as awful as I was, I loved the music too much to quit. That love inspired me to work and eventually find my way to the unconscious grace that only comes through hard work and repetition.

I am not gifted in any way, just stubbornly in love.

This is not a matter of philosophy or religion. Fancy people will always complicate things with categories and other busyness. This is just about work. Applied effort as we learn to see and experience the world around us plainly for the playground it truly is.

In this book, I won't be teaching or lecturing you. There won't be many quotes cut and pasted from wiser writers and there will be no definitive philosophical terms. Instead, I want this to be a conversation. Imagine the two of us on a picnic or walking together down a country lane. All I want is for you to see—to see yourself and the amazing world around you, to realize that you can accomplish things beyond your imagination, and to take part in the dance rather than to berate yourself as a wallflower.

Take my hand. There is so much to see and to do and to be. You don't have to believe in yourself right now. I believe in you.

Come on. Let's talk about wildflowers.

Wildflowers

You can learn everything you need to know from a wildflower.

Yeah, I know. That sounds like I spent the last fifty years in a VW microbus living on 'shrooms and following Grateful Dead tribute bands across the Midwest, living by selling macrame and sculptures made from toenail clippings. A lot of the old wisdom fell into trite catchphrases through well-intentioned overuse by souls grasping for wisdom like a man stumbling in the dark. That makes us cynical when it comes to simple truths.

Still, there is much to learn from wildflowers.

The thing about wildflowers is that they don't care where they grow. There is no cultivation, landscape architecture, aesthetics, or planning involved. The seed is dropped by wind or wildlife, and it grows.

Think about that for a second. To be completely helpless—carried by currents you cannot understand to a place fair or foul and finding a way to grow, bloom, and spread. That, my friend, is power—and perhaps wisdom.

Whenever I begin something, there is always a moment when I hesitate, wondering if there may be a better place or time to start work. As if taking that first step requires some optimal setting that will ensure success. Telling myself that I am not procrastinating, just waiting for a sunnier or cooler day. As if the chaos of my everyday life will drop away, I find myself waiting for a golden hour that never comes.

When I fall into this trap, I think about wildflowers.

When I was a child, I never thought about the flowers growing all over rural Chester County, Pennsylvania. Back in the 1970s, it was a beautiful and dangerous place. The infamous Kiddie Gang, subjects of the wildly inaccurate crime noir At Close Range, were both menacing my father and trying to recruit me. I knew Robin Miller, the teenage girl they murdered in cold blood.

Robin called me Tiger. She would tousle my hair and fuss over me every time she came into dad's hoagie shop, always in the wake of Bruce Johnston Jr. and the rest of the Kiddie gang. I'd watch the group huddled around the Asteroids machine, guns sticking out of their waistbands. I never understood why she was drawn to such violent men. Robin was a ray of light. Fifty years later, I still cry for her.

To escape the Kiddie Gang and the other violence that hung over the village of Marshallton like a shroud, I would often run to the woods and hedgerow, escaping the struggles at home and soaking in the loveliness of the landscape. The wildflowers were something that decorated the scenery. Pretty, but so abundant I took them for granted.

When I was seven, my mother started spinning and dyeing fleece for wealthy landowners in the area. I was put to work helping her prepare the raw wool for her spinning wheel. Then, I was sent out to gather natural dyes—wandering the woods gathering great baskets of specific plants to conjure pigments to color the spun yarn. Jewelweed, Joe-Pye weed, sage, and sassafras.

After hours of searching for and gathering the wild plants for the dyes, my mother and I would begin the hard work at the dye pots. Cooking down bushels of herbs into dyes. Soaking the yarn in mordant before the careful process of dyeing the yarn. It sounds simple, but breaking down these raw materials into consistent coloring took great skill and patience—something Mom had in abundance.

The work was brutal. Hours and hours picking burrs from the fleece while mom labored at the spinning wheel. Our hands slick with lanolin. The dye pots overloading the house with the herbaceous scent of the dyes and wet wool. The trial and error of getting vat after vat of dye a consistent color. All of our hard work only paying a pittance, and every penny we earned was desperately needed.

Wildflowers became blocks of colors. The work had altered my perspective.

As I grew older, wildflowers brought nostalgia. The fear of my childhood, the violence of the Kiddie Gang, and other threats of that time and place were thick as mud. Sitting by my mother's spinning wheel became a refuge. The rhythm of her foot on the treadle. The rough resistance as I carded the raw wool. The thorns and briars against my skin as I harvested dyes and the stink of the dye pot mixed with wet yarn. My mother would sing hymns as she worked the wheel, and I would lean against her to feel the rumble of her voice. I loved her more than chocolate, and wildflowers still bring those warm memories rushing back to me. Irresistible as the tide.

Then, as life will do, I grew older. While wildflowers brought the light and darkness of my past forward in my memory, I began to learn other things from the flowers growing along the road.

You see, a wildflower doesn't choose where to grow. It simply blooms where it is planted. There is no choice involved. The seed is scattered by wind or wildlife and, once settled, takes root and blooms against all odds. Whether it's in a sunny embankment or fighting its way through the cracks in the pavement, it finds a way to flourish as best it can.

While we appreciate the color and majesty of the bloom—unless it is a dandelion in our supposedly perfect green lawn—and maybe even find utility in wildflowers for things like dyes or floral arrangements, wildflowers are not growing for us. There is no intentionality or purpose. They grow for themselves. To bloom, then wither and become scattered seeds so that more life can begin.

It is easy to fall prey to the illusion we are the main character—that the flowers dotting a field are for our enjoyment, that the lives moving about us are extras on a set. To view the world in terms of our own aesthetics and utility to our needs. Many of the angry and unhappy people who cross our paths are operating under this mistaken perspective. We fall for the philosophical trap of waiting for the right place, the right job, the right person, the right time, and all of that other noise. Forgetting that sometimes choice is a luxury, and we are often faced with the hard choice of blooming where we are planted or not growing at all.

Just as a Black-eyed Susan has no choice in having thimbleweed or purple aster growing next to it, we lack the same options in the people who surround us. Every life around you is dealing with its own hardships and joys. No matter the burdens you may carry, every person you meet is in the grip of battles you cannot fathom.

Just as wildflowers are not here for our enjoyment, your neighbors are not there to facilitate anything for your benefit. It is up to each of us to be open beyond our own needs and desires and find the will and the strength to help others, if they are willing, find a way to bloom. You can literally save or change a life with something as simple as a warm smile or a cup of coffee.

When I was a teenager, I used to skip school and busk on the sidewalks and subways of Philadelphia. It was a way for me to both practice and find teachers. Sometimes musicians with far greater skills than my own would sit down next to me and offer an impromptu lesson right on the spot. Information shared like a bee pollinating a wild bloom. How to form a chord, how to find a scale, and even how to play the boogie shuffle on the guitar.

Other times, the rough police of that place and time would beat me senseless and rob me. There were a few times when all I could do was wrap myself in the fetal position, protecting my guitar or banjo as officers kicked my ribs in, raided my case for money, and even stole my smokes.

The violence always came as a jolt. They would creep up behind me and knock me senseless with a brutal elbow drop to the shoulder. I was a rabbit grazing in a meadow suddenly finding itself in the talons of a hawk. The explosiveness of that kind of encounter is not something you can prepare for, and fighting back would only have made it worse.

But playing on the street was where I got my musical education. I chalked up the lumps as the price of tuition. After those police beatdowns, I couldn't go to my parents and tell them I skipped school. So, I would wander to my Aunt Mannie's house.

Mannie would doctor me up and feed me the best grilled cheese sandwiches and tomato soup you ever tasted. Then she would take me by the hand and lead me to church. She would have me light a candle for each police officer who rolled me that day, and one extra for the women they go home to.

The first time we did this, it felt silly. An empty gesture against a cold world.

Over time, I slowly realized what Mannie was teaching me: unconditional love mixed with a deeper insight into the underappreciated ripples our lives can carry forward.

Forgiving the men who beat me was one thing. Thinking of the other lives around them, the damage they did, lighting a candle for the spouse facing that brutality on an inescapable daily basis was another thing entirely. It forced a change in my perspective—to see my tormentors beyond their impact on me and become aware not only that they generated a radius of pain, but that some injury or misinterpreted lesson made them that way.

I think of Mannie and her hard lessons when I look at wildflowers. Mannie wasn't really my aunt. She was a cousin so distant we were barely related. She chose to love me for reasons I cannot understand any more than a seed can fathom why it ended up in a field or cracked parking lot. The only matter of choice involved was for me to accept that love and flourish under it. She had nothing, but always had something to share. I loved her more than music.

When Mannie died, my father came with me to her funeral. He said he had to pay his respects to this tiny giant of a woman. At the service, he leaned into her coffin and whispered something in her ear. Later, I built up the nerve to ask him what he said.

"I thanked her for being good to my son."

We have no choice where we bloom. Carried by gentle winds or dropped in dung, it is up to every living thing to find a way to thrive where we are planted. Yes, there are situations that require escape. I have had a few moments where I have been forced to cut and run. Yet, these escape routes always lead to unexpected places. I once set out for rural Maine and instead spent over twenty-five years teaching banjo in Maryland.

The conditions are not always ideal, but sometimes hardships provide the opportunity to develop stronger roots or learn hard lessons so deep they can only be revealed through difficulty.

Being deaf made it harder to become a musician, but it also forced me to appreciate every note.

Getting stomped on the subway in Philly was awful, but it also made me aware of just how important street art can be to lonely people going about their day. Between the beatings, I had some

profound encounters. It wasn't just some random person dropping a dollar in my case; I was defiantly creating something beautiful—something that made people smile, made mothers dance their babies on their knees, or brought back distant memories of family singing on the front porch.

The lack of control I speak of—that unintentionality of events that carry us, plant us, and generate the conditions in which we grow—is something I have repeated a few times now, but I cannot stress the importance of understanding this enough. We so easily fall into the illusion of control, believing that we can plan for any adversity, and it is nothing but fooling ourselves. Build a fireproof house with a bomb shelter and it can still be knocked down by an earthquake. Study hard in school, go into debt for a higher education, and graduate just as the job market drops like a rock. Things just happen, and much of it is beyond our control. You can drive yourself crazy trying to plan every step of your journey before starting, only to trip and break your ankle on your doorstep. Being aware of this, it would be easy to get fatalistic—but I find it freeing.

There is an old saying that goes, "If you don't care where you are, you ain't lost." It's hilarious, but also deeply true. It is far better to let life take you where you need to go and allow yourself to grow.

Growth is rarely easy, and no life is entirely free of pain. That pain can shape us, bend our stems, or lead us to striking a kid playing for change on the curb. The only thing we can control is how we use that pain and allow it to shape or distort our actions. Love is an overwhelming force, but forgiveness and kindness are choices.

There is also the matter of ripples beyond our actions. The wildflower blooms unaware of the bees and butterflies pollinating it, and those pollinators are oblivious to the hardships of the bloom. Just as I could not know the memories my music on the streets revived in passersby, each of us goes about giving and receiving unconsciously through our day. Holding the door for the person behind you. Offering a smile to a stranger when we make eye contact. Being patient with the customer ahead of us in line. Everything impacts everything, and the more aware we are of that, the easier it becomes to choose love over impatience.

If you consciously choose love long enough, it stops being a voluntary action and becomes a natural reflex. The choice and formality drop away and there is nothing except love—direct from the heart and stronger than a double espresso. The power of Aunt Mannie's love for me, for the police who hurt me, and for the women they went home to, was not that it was some kind of conscious action. The power was in the sheer lack of any thought or decision. It was not something she did to please people or teach a lesson. It was not a workaround to get a better spot in heaven. It was, as unbelievable as it sounds, nothing but love.

I was a trained fighter, but Mannie was far more powerful and formidable because she operated from pure love.

One thing to bear in mind with this wildflower analogy is that we are not always stuck in bad situations. We can spread our roots. We can find ways to escape unkind situations and find new places to grow and flourish. Branching out to a place where the sun shines a little brighter or kinder.

The seed loves to sprout. The sprout loves to grow. The plant loves to bloom. The bloom loves the bee. A natural flowing progression we can each embrace, even when it comes time to release and go to seed. This is love. This is power and redemption and grace. This is everything.

With all of these lessons to ponder from something as simple as wildflowers, it is easy to forget the simple fact of their beauty.

I mean, just stop and look. Aren't they pretty?

The Art of the Steal

Blooming where you are planted is a beautiful thing, but you have to watch out for choking vines and creepy-crawlies that will suck on your roots. I learned this the hard way.

One of the most honest men I ever met was a professional liar.

I know. Talk about counter-intuitive. Liars operate on deception, twisting words and ideas into whatever serves their purpose in manipulative and sometimes downright cruel ways. Yet, this liar taught me some hard truths.

One of the regular customers at my father's hoagie shop in the middle of the battleground that was Chester County, Pennsylvania in the 1970s was a con man we only knew as Fast Eddie.

Eddie was something else. He looked like everybody and dressed to blend in. I spotted him right away by his complete anonymity. Being almost deaf, I had to learn lip-reading and body language at an early age. Dad wouldn't let me learn sign language out of fear of having to learn it himself, so I had to develop my own ways to communicate. I copied my grandfather's speech patterns and overpronounced my words to speak clearly. The trouble with that was PopPop was born in 1901, so I picked up his old-world Philly accent. My body language reading skills, even as a nine-year-old, made guys like Fast Eddie easy to spot in a lie, but he always slipped past my dad's radar.

Eddie was always playing my dad for a few bucks and a sandwich. I don't think he ever paid for his lunch once. I tried to warn my parents, but they would angrily defend Eddie's honor, trusting their own misperceptions and Eddie's appeals to their vanity over their nine-year-old deaf son's ability to read body language.

One afternoon, a police car brought Eddie to dad's shop. In a move that boggled my young mind, Eddie had somehow, after being arrested and handcuffed, talked the officer into bringing him by the shop before dragging him to jail. I still don't know how he did it. The sheer nerve and human engineering of the feat left me gobsmacked. Dad acted like it was nothing new. Just another Monday.

Eddie explained from the rear passenger window, in handcuffs, that he had been caught by the cops for something, and he needed money from dad to pay his fine and avoid doing time. The policeman who brought Eddie to us hung his head in disbelief as my father took money he could not afford out of the cash register. Eddie had to twist himself so that dad could drop the money into hands that were cuffed behind his back.

I was furious with my dad. Eddie shook his head to lower his shades and give me a wink. "Patrick, this time I'm gonna make it right. I'll pay your dad back. Just watch and wait."

I didn't believe him. From the look on his face, the cop felt the same.

A few days later, a small fleet of dump trucks, three or four of them, pulled behind the shop and dropped off tons of cobblestones. The drivers did not say much, only that Eddie had sent them and that we should not bother with them.

A large black man smoking a cigar put it simply, "There are no cobblestones. Just ignore them and everything will be fine."

Dad went along with it. I sat on top of the mountain of Belgian blocks and stewed with frustration. I may have been just a kid, but this stank on ice.

A few days later, Eddie showed up. His Corvette with a fake inspection sticker and ever- changing license plates was followed by several sedans. Men in suits looked over the cobblestones. A deal was struck, a check was written, hands were shaken. The men drove away. Eddie told my dad he would have his money as soon as the check was cashed.

A few days later, PennDOT trucks came for the cobblestones. Not long after, Eddie came around and dramatically presented dad with the money he owed. To my parents, it was all over. Dad was paid back, Eddie was free, and my family forgot the whole thing. Mom scolded me not to worry. It was just Fast Eddie being himself. I was told not to ask questions.

The next time Eddie came to scam a free lunch from dad, I stopped him in the parking lot. I asked about the cobblestones. He thought it was both interesting and funny that I was wise to him, so he told me.

Eddie had hijacked trucks and construction equipment, organized a crew, stole an entire cobblestone street in Philadelphia near Penn's Landing, stashed the stones in our parking lot, and sold them back to the city.

It sounded unbelievable. Like something from a bad movie. Yet, I had seen the dump trucks, the cobblestones, and the sale. Eddie had sealed his deal and paid off my dad. The audacity of it was staggering. Eddie knew that I could see through his act, so he had no reason to lie. He really had stolen equipment, gathered a crew, stole an entire cobblestone street, and sold it back to a city that most likely was aware of his crime but did not care. I was both impressed and horrified. My father's acceptance of Eddie's actions as long as he got paid was completely unsettling. This was a distortion of right and wrong that went against everything I knew, yet everybody, even the cops, loved Eddie.

There was only one way to understand. I asked Eddie to teach me.

For the rest of that long, hot summer, Eddie spent his lunchtimes chowing down on free cheesesteaks while teaching me the art of the con. We talked for hours, and what he shared with me became burdensome knowledge.

Eddie's first lesson was simple: a mark keeps paying.

He explained that you only had to fool money out of somebody once. It doesn't matter how you get that money. The initial scam can be so minor that it comes across as innocent—but once somebody pays out once, the ego kicks in. After that first payout, a mark will never admit to themselves that they have been had. The truth is just too painful. So, rather than face reality, they keep handing you money. That's how faith healers operate, and why old ladies will continue to send money to televangelists no matter how strongly their families intervene. Once a mark hands you money, you own them. You can clean them out, and they will thank you and even stand up for you.

That first lesson cost me a lot of sleep. It made me look at things differently. I started seeing that transformation of a person into a mark and then a money fountain in wildly different places. From the church collection plate to the gas pump, I was surrounded by adults who were overpaying by reflex. Clerics promise an endlessly happy afterlife where anything you want is handed to you, car salesmen sell you the undercoating, prices get gouged, and people just reach for their wallets without really thinking.

I learned a lot more from Eddie, and I soon found myself growing skilled in the art of bullshit. I tried his techniques in nickel-and-dime games to score candy from a local shop or talk grannies into buying me model kits. My goals were not criminal. I was simply testing Eddie's lessons—all while

growing increasingly uneasy about the psychology involved. Instead of the thrill that Eddie described, all I really felt was horror at how willfully blind people can be. It left me nauseous.

To Eddie, the con was both survival and a rush. To me, it felt dangerous.

I am ashamed to admit that I got good at the art of bullshit. While I never fell into Eddie's habit of making a living on lies, there have been times in my adventures when being able to talk somebody into helping me has saved my ass. I always throw up after a fistfight, and I always hate myself when I have to bullshit somebody into something—even to get a meal or a place to sleep. I guess that is the price of a functioning conscience.

The thing that terrifies me is the ease with which people will allow themselves to be misled. If you learn the right buzzwords and leave enough blanks, the ego of your mark will do all the heavy lifting. Even with my thick Philly accent, I have been mistaken for a Southern boy trying to get home, a down-on-his-luck missionary for whatever church the other guy attends, and other things. People are so lonely and distracted that they will fall for anything if it gives them both a sense of connection and the warm feeling of being useful.

Fast Eddie's lessons started as something I was curious to learn, then an occasional tool for survival, and then a skill I fear using as much as I do my martial arts training. Knowing how to dismantle people physically and financially sounds cool in movies and comic books. In real life, these skills, coupled with a working moral compass, leave you like Larry Talbot from The Wolf Man running from the moon.

To calm my troubled soul, I repurposed Fast Eddie's cynical lessons into something positive. Instead of looking for weakness in strangers, I started using my skills to get closer to them—to have empathy in casual conversation or potentially violent confrontation. Using a con artist's human engineering in tandem with Aunt Mannie's loving outlook has made me a better teacher and a better person.

We also con ourselves. As a music teacher, I was always having the same conversation with students. They would approach me thinking that learning guitar or banjo was just a matter of learning a few specific songs. Memorize a bit of tab (a shorthand notation system marking only the strings to fret, pick, or strum) and they would be off to musical nirvana. I mean, they would sometimes show up with their entire careers planned out before they even learned to tune their instruments.

So, you can imagine their shock and confusion as, in the first lesson, I would explain that music is not memorization. That old-time banjo and country blues guitar were, in fact, improvisational approaches to music. That, in folk music, you don't go to your first jam with a list of perfectly polished songs under your belt. Instead, you take a few simple concepts and make a perfect ass out of yourself at the jam as you learn the flow of music—the melody, rhythm, and harmony— by trial and error.

A lot of the students who came to me would get really upset by the way the actual training process differed from what they imagined. Almost as if they took it personally that life did not conform to their daydreams. Some would even accuse me of withholding some secret technique, like David Carradine's Bill fabulously pouting at the end of Kill Bill: "Pai Mei taught you the five-point-palm-exploding-heart technique?"

The students who could let go of that initial misconception and get down to work were always surprised at how easily the music came to them. It's a funny thing to witness as a teacher because I was there coaching them when they initially struggled for long periods of time, but then, one day, they fell into the ease of ease. When that happens, the skill in question has a way of becoming naturalized. You begin to forget the time when this skill was new to you.

The students who insisted on learning song by song? In a lifetime of teaching, I never saw that approach work. Even if they got a few songs memorized, it was all they could do. In the old-time way I am part of, you walk away able to play anything. The song-by-song or solo-by-solo approach leaves you a permanent student—and there is an entire industry of music lessons that don't work, but happily take your money.

There are always going to be teachers who sell daydreams, and there will always be old-timers sharing the actual work. When I was studying martial arts under Ed Parker, Remy Presas, and Ted "Mr. No Legs" Vollrath (we'll get into karate and the ease of ease in the next chapter), Remy and my dad took me to a no-touch knockout workshop led by a legendary fake master.

I'll leave the no-touch knockout guru's name out for reasons that will become clear in a moment.

In this workshop, an adenoidal man so fat that he couldn't fully close the jacket of his uniform, his black belt straining against his gut like an ant trying to carry a watermelon, rambled about the mystical bodily energy of chi. He claimed that he could knock people out with a touch, increase or decrease his body weight, and a whole bunch of other nonsense. Then, he did some demonstrations with his marks—I mean 'students'. As I sat there trying not to laugh out loud, he had members of his personality cult come at him individually and in groups. With the lightest touch, his followers would throw themselves backwards, shaking in epileptic fits like that elephant Edison electrocuted to mess with Tesla.

As I said, I was a student of true grandmasters. Now, Ed Parker may have had a bit of PT Barnum-style bullshit in his marketing, but the man could truly fight and teach. I had real training under my belt. I knew the actual physical force and physics of a knockout. Hell, I had been knocked out more than a few times. I also knew from Fast Eddie that there is no magic in the world other than the laughter of children or maybe that little smile your lover slips you in quiet moments.

So, I knew right away that this fat fake master was pulling a scam. There is no death touch. Even the meridians in acupuncture are wishful thinking, with scientific studies proving that fake acupuncture with a good patter and the needles in random places gives the same results as the work of a trained professional.

Spotting the guru as a fraud was easy. The thing that rattled me was the students. Why in the actual hell were these grown men and women playing along?

Then Eddie's words came back to me. A mark keeps paying. The students flying around and collapsing in groups knew this was childish nonsense. They had paid good money for training and applied real effort into fake training. That investment in money and sweat, coupled with the social compliance that makes us go along even against our better judgment, was forcing them to play along.

The fat guru went into examples of his ability to ground himself. He stood on one foot, held out his right arm, and challenged anybody in attendance to knock him down. A few people in the audience threw themselves into his extended hand and pretended to bounce back while he stood rooted like a tree.

I raised my hand. I was told to step forward. I walked up, gave a formal bow, and delivered a brutal front kick to the fat guru's balls. He dropped like a sack of dirty laundry.

My dad, who was attending the workshop with me out of curiosity, broke out laughing and shouted, "Jesus Christ, Patrick!" Everybody else gasped. The fat guru lay curled up on the floor clutching his swollen testicles.

Remy roared with laughter. I gave another deep formal bow and walked away. My dad laughed all the way home.

As I grew older, the lessons learned from Fast Eddie became a blessing and a burden. When you can spot the little man behind the curtain pretending to be Oz the Great and Powerful, it can make the fun part of being fooled harder to attain. Sometimes I find myself playing along with an obvious con just for the amusement of seeing what the bullshitter is trying to pull. I won't be a mark, but I'll play along and sometimes even give the con artist a wink and perform along if I think the joke is worth it.

I have made some good friends and had quite a few adventures from knowingly playing along.

I once got pulled onstage as part of a stage hypnotist act with a group of strangers. I was excited as the hypnotist herded us into a line and went into his spiel. I had read a lot about hypnotism and seen some weird stuff on television. I kept an open mind about the whole thing because I had never had anybody try to hypnotize me. How could I know for sure without experiencing it?

So, when the hypnotist waved his hand at us saying, "You will now sleep," I was disappointed to remain awake. The thing that shocked me was that the rest of the group dropped their heads. I peered at them and I could tell they were as awake as I was—they were simply going along with the act.

The hypnotist did his act and the rest of the group responded to his every command. I just sat there and looked around. The audience started to laugh, and I mugged for the crowd a bit. Eventually, the hypnotist leaned in close and whispered, "You're killing me. Come on, buddy. Give a guy a break. Play along."

I winked at him. We then fell into an improvised routine where, after great psychic struggle, I was eventually vanquished by his mind powers. He took advantage of my playing along and ran me through the ringer. My friends harassed me for weeks over the things the hypnotist 'forced' me to do. I didn't mind that; it was fun letting them fall for the act. Also, the hypnotist slipped me twenty bucks and a few of his tapes after the show.

I think the trick is balance. You can maintain a sense of wonder while being aware of the tricks on the streets. You can know how to lie, the mechanics of the con, but still be completely honest and authentic. This is the art of dancing to the silent music. To look at the world aware of its dangers, and choose to love it fearlessly anyway.

Fast Eddie taught me how to spot a mark and to lie with enough sincerity that I could run risk of fooling myself. I thank him for that. Hell. I love him for that.

Still, I wound up applying Fast Eddie’s lessons in ways he might not have expected. To see the world as it is right down to fake hypnotists in tattered tuxedos, love it completely, and act as a positive force for good, while still being able and willing to duck out from the midway and shoot craps with the carnies. The world, marks and all, is a beautiful place.

The Ease of Ease

When I was very young, it seemed as if everything was difficult. I was clumsy. I have almost no spatial relationships, so I often tripped over my own two feet. I was almost deaf from conductive hearing loss, making it hard to speak and understand others. I have dyscalculia, so math class was bewildering, and a blind mind's eye made remembering details difficult. I felt like the most convoluted ganglion of out-of-tune nerve endings to ever flop outside the primordial ooze.

As a teenager, Ed Parker gave me the all-clear to instruct adults in Kenpo karate, and Remy Presas in Modern Arnis. I could take on an opponent twice my size and age. I moved with unconscious grace, a fierce fighter who remained composed taking a hard hit. I trained in the karate studio five nights a week, hiding injuries from my dad to keep my training schedule— including having my nose reset twice by other fighters. I worked brutally hard for years before I even started getting halfway good. People watched me at the peak of my training and said it came easy for me.

As an adult, I became a music teacher. I could play just about anything with strings, but for some crazy reason, I became best known as a banjo teacher. Playing at a top level despite my profound hearing loss was not exactly easy, but I used any and every tool I could conjure. Dad would say, "You make the most out of what you've got," and that is what I did.

I just described mastering country blues guitar while deaf. Sit with that for a moment. Not for my sake—I'm not looking for sympathy. But take a breath of empathy and imagine struggling to hear the notes of your own guitar through your very bones. Every note I managed to sense became a source of joy precisely because of how hard it was to find.

There was no money for lessons, so I picked up my skills on the streets from the old-timers. A true oral-tradition musical education. I sang in churches, union halls, street corners—even Upper Darby's IRA underground and strip clubs on the seriously bad side of Atlantic City. I threw everything I had into learning the language of music, collecting bits and pieces of information from old-timers and struggling with the puzzles until my command of music was better than most players with perfect hearing. People would watch me teach, hear me play, and say that it came easy for me—that I was a natural musician.

Nothing came easy for me. I can understand it with karate. Training montages in movies boil huge spans of time and effort down to a few images stitched over some godawful headbanger ballad. When you don't see the formative stages—the beatings, the blood, the sweat, the tears— they rarely enter your mind. We see the end result. Like children, we assume the artist or athlete in question was always naturally skilled.

As somebody with heavy training in my background, I can tell you that the movie training montage skips over the best parts of the process: the beauty of a human being discovering the awesome power and grace of the human body.

I was ten years old when my father decided to teach me discipline by dropping me into adult karate lessons. I was small for my age, standing five foot two until I hit a growth spurt when I turned eighteen. My lack of spatial relationships meant I could not judge the distance to block or dodge a punch or kick. I was training with grown men who did not yet know how to pull a punch.

I got hurt bad—I mean real bad—in four different karate studios; we didn't call them dojos back then. These were storefront operations run by men with no real training or skill, fly-by-night operations like the one Count Dante advertised in comic books. Some of the men in these fake karate studios liked to hurt people—especially kids. After being used as a punching bag in four bad training centers, I finally

found real teachers. Two years of being brutalized, just so I could truly begin the hard work of real training.

I have held back mentioning this until now, but karate was not something I initially wanted. Like I told you, I have some learning disabilities that made things hard when I was a kid. My grandfather spotted this when I was a toddler.

Now, my grandfather was a complicated man. Born in 1901 in the great city of Philadelphia, my grandfather was a feared bare-knuckle boxer. His street fighting skills were epic. In his late eighties, he got mugged by two young men. When the cops arrived, my grandfather had beaten them senseless and hogtied them both. He was tougher than a cheap steak.

So, my grandfather, realizing other kids would bully me, started teaching me how to fight before I started nursery school.

When I started first grade, it was in Catholic school: Saints Simon and Jude, West Chester, Pennsylvania. The nuns teaching there did not accept my learning disabilities and hearing loss as anything but laziness. They beat the snot out of me, but my grandfather never pulled his punches. So, I'd take a right straight to the mouth by one of the good sisters, get up slowly, and tell her, "You hit like a girl!"

Since beating me themselves didn't work, the nuns sent my classmates after me. I used what my grandfather taught me. The parents of would-be bullies got mad about the doctor bills, and dad sent me to karate. He seemed to be operating under the delusion that hanging out with grown men who train to hurt people every day would somehow make me more docile.

The crazy thing is, even in the fake schools where I got hurt, I fell in love with the training. Not karate itself. The truth is, I hate fighting. All of the schoolyard brawls ended with me puking my guts out, once I was safe. My grandfather was a hard but thorough teacher. He drilled me so hard on the basic fighting stance, protecting my head or body, and delivering a knock-down blow that I didn't have to think about the actions. The fights always went the same way: bully approaches, I humiliate myself to avoid conflict, bully takes a swing, and I... Well, I just moved. Dodge or deflect the punch and then counterattack with a full-body punch, turning my body as I step in to increase the impact. It happened in seconds. The horror of it was that hurting anybody disgusted me, but that moment of freedom in the heat of the fight was thrilling and intoxicating.

My grandfather shaped me from a clumsy child into a capable street fighter. Once I found a real karate studio, I was shaped from a street fighter into a martial artist.

To understand training, I think in terms of a blacksmith. The smith takes the iron and heats it until it's red-hot or white-hot—brutal temperatures to soften the metal so he can hammer the snot out of it. That heating and hammering should be destructive, but with a skilled smith, the end result of this harrowing process is something useful: a lump of iron shaped into a tool or horseshoe.

I have entered the forge to shape myself multiple times.

The thing I loved about karate from my first time walking into the sweaty funk of a training center was the idea that I was my only opponent. They had me stand in front of a mirror as they drilled me in stances, basic blocks, punching, and kicking. I would be there, leg muscles screaming from the strain of the horse stance, throwing my arms and legs in specific motions over and over again—an hour at a time

at the studio, then hours more in the driveway at home. I would wake up at night with my arms still throwing blocks and punches.

I loved it.

I hated the fighting aspect of it, especially during the early days of my training when my ass was bubblegum every time I stepped into the ring. I hated the awful physics of inflicting pain, but those hours running through the basics were sweet—sweeter still as the sweat equity began to pay off and I fell into the ease of ease.

The ease of ease. I can't recall the first time I heard it called that, but I like the way it frames the experience. As a fighter, photographer, teacher, musician, and now a writer, that ease of ease is everything. Something that cannot be explained directly, only pointed at in the most abstract sense, but, once tasted, has everything you need to know.

Remember earlier when I told you about my Aunt Mannie? She didn't just love me. Mannie loved everybody. She prayed for men who hurt me—and not in some manipulative way. Mannie just loved. The hardest thing in the world to do: to look upon the cold, casual cruelty of the world and effortlessly respond with nothing but love.

Mannie wasn't a saint. She had a brutally difficult life. She had to work in order to find love in her heart. After years of disappointments and sorrow, the work Mannie put into loving others took over. She just loved. The training and its lessons falling away until what had once been a conscious choice was now a reflex action.

In karate, I trained until the training took over. My childish clumsiness fell away and I fought with the irresistible power and force of a rushing river. I took joy in discovering how my body could move, roll, snap, and leap into effortless action. In the ring, my head would go completely and marvelously empty. I did not think about blocking and striking; I moved efficiently and thoughtlessly. My concern was not winning the fight, but controlling my opponent's ability to harm me, and I found joy in the freedom of the battle. It wasn't like the movies. It was slow, and it was painful, and it was heartbreaking, and it was beautiful.

Then, one day, it was all over.

A car accident ended my exploration of the martial arts. One moment I was a passenger, and the next I was a victim. Our car was hit head-on by a nun speeding on icy roads in a huge sedan doing sixty because she was late for a dentist appointment.

Of course it was a nun. Of course it was.

My seat belt failed. I went headfirst into the frame of the windshield, bounced back into my seat, then bounced forward and took out the windshield with my face. Somehow, I got up and walked away, but the damage was done. I started having seizures not long after that. Karate was suddenly no longer part of my life.

It took me a little time to process losing the martial arts in my life. I had been in the karate studio five nights a week, training even longer and harder at home. I had been under the wing of three grandmasters. My body had once moved with an unconscious and unthinking power and grace, instinct shaped by training, turned into reflexive action. Now, I was just another schnook.

Then, I remembered my teachers. Ed Parker was a mountain of a man, a bit of a bullshit artist, and profoundly wise. Years before the accident, Ed sat me down and asked what I was planning after karate. The question left me dumbfounded. After karate? My training was my entire world, my escape from school bullies and the pressure of home. How could I go on without karate?

Ed Parker was patient with my confusion but pressed on. He said that life takes sudden turns. The thing I would need to remember if something stopped my martial arts training was not the fighting, but how I learned—the way I built my skills from the ground up. Ed summed it up with his signature simplicity: "The way you were taught in Kenpo can be applied to any discipline. Even music."

Parker's line about music threw me for a loop. I took up the harmonica and mountain dulcimer when I was seven years old. In the late 1970s, there were still people living underground after running from the draft during the Vietnam War. Music found me by way of a hippie camp on the Brandywine — more on that later.

So, I loved music despite my deafness. Rather than allow the loss of martial arts to destroy me, I picked up my father's banjo and started training with the same logic, intensity, and sincerity of my Kenpo training.

I didn't just become a musician. The Washington Post dubbed me The Merry God of Banjo.

I threw myself into music body and soul. The challenge of hearing my banjo or guitar through my teeth was daunting. Sorting out and gaining fluency in the language of music was beyond difficult. I played badly at first, gained skill, and eventually began to perform and teach with the ease I had once known in karate.

The wild thing was, my karate training set the stage. Meeting each new challenge—like picking up chord changes, improvising melodies I could barely hear, or sharing the basics with a beginner—revealed that they were all extensions of things I had already explored in the martial arts. I was not learning new skills as much as I was applying the skills and philosophy of fighting to new disciplines.

I taught and I sang. Broke into the Grand Ole Opry before I was eighteen and played on that legendary stage between shows. I was so good that security let me play for a while and gave me the nickel tour. Radio, television, and a stack of books on music to my credit. Thousands of hours of practice. Wild times on stage and long nights swapping songs over whiskey and cigarette smoke. Tens of thousands of students following my instructions, and adventures so wild you would never believe them. Hell, when I toured Europe, a crazy Norwegian tried to sacrifice me to Thor on the epic cliff of Preikestolen.

When I was fifty-five, I had a seizure. A bad one. When I came out of it, my left hand could no longer fret notes or chords. I tried to adapt around the problem for six months, then it hit me: music was no longer part of my life.

This will strike some as tragic. I will admit, tears were shed when I packed up my instruments and gave them away—but these were not bitter tears. Seeing my custom instruments, tools I had treasured and used hard, going back out into the world in the hands of my students was moving, but not exactly sad. Sure, the change sucked donkey balls—but my training in Kenpo led to music. My skills and knowledge in both of the disciplines had changed me, and I was now ready for whatever next thing life had in store.

So, I sat down and started writing this. To you.

The other thing movies with training montages get wrong is the aftermath. We see the hero in a brief scattering of training scenes, the hero wins the battle, gets the trophy/girl/guy/dog, and happily ever after.

The reality is that everything has a price. My time in martial arts was golden. There was the pain of bruised and broken bones. There was blood. There were tears. There were also moments of profound, flowing, and easy grace—moments where my body seemed to move of its own accord. The snapping crispness as I moved through a kata. The flowing ease I had with knives and sticks. I mean, I'm not going to turn this into an autobiography with tons of personal stories, but I trained with grandmasters. Remy Presas took me under his wing. Ted Vollrath, legless in a wheelchair, picked me up by the jacket of my gi and snarled, "You can accomplish anything!"

My time in martial arts was golden, but everything has a time. When I walked out of the karate studio, I was already feeling the damage I had done to my body. Now, I'm old and slow. My face looks like a Picasso from all of the fights, and my knuckles are a mess. In my mid-fifties, I'm now noticing I've had too many concussions. I trained, I gained skills, I acquired hard-won knowledge, I fought like a tank, I got old, the injuries caught up with me, and now I'm giving pointers to local kids out in the yard, correcting form as I lean on my cane.

My time in music was also golden. I won't run down the resume, but I had one hell of a freaky career. I fought impossible odds just to begin training in music, did things nobody had ever done, sang for people in places you would not believe. The music started out difficult—a battle. Then, after a lot of tears, it came naturally and flowing, like cold beer on a parched tongue in a shady spot on a perfect summer afternoon. It was the most beautiful thing that ever happened to me. Then, it was gone.

Friends tell me that losing my ability to play stringed instruments should have destroyed me. I find that sad. Life is a matter of constant change. We began aging the moment we were born. In the heat of the dance, when the work leads us to the ease of ease, those shining hours seem eternal, but every song, every fight, every dance, every embrace, every goodbye could be your last. We try to think of ways to manage time, but every second is running away from us. Nothing lasts forever. Mountains are ground down into sand. The forge that shapes you also instills damage that will come around to haunt you in old age.

The art of the ease of ease is acceptance and love. Love of the training. Love of the adversities we face as we learn and grow under conditions both compassionate and brutal. Love of the changes that lead us into and then away from the revealing glow of the spotlight.

Martial arts is in my past, but still in my present. I still think like a fighter. I can still, if the situation requires, open a massive can of whoop-ass.

My time as a performing musician is over. I still have a massive sampling of the oral-tradition methods of teaching music stored in my brain. I can still teach, and I can still find ways to make music around or with my new disabilities. I might get myself a new theremin.

You don't need a guru or a philosophy book to learn the ease of ease. Just look around you. Watch a long-haul trucker back a rig into a tight loading dock. Watch a short-order cook glide through a busy breakfast service. Watch the world around you and you'll discover people everywhere performing complex tasks with unknowing grace.

The trick is that you can't point out these easy moments. Self-awareness brings the whole house of cards crashing down. Compliment that short-order cook on knocking out endless runs of perfect bacon and eggs, and he will likely fall apart and burn your eggs.

Life is a dance. You start out shaking your booty out of rhythm and keep trying until you fall into the motion. Dance with everything you are while you can. When it's time, step off the dance floor. There is a new dance waiting for you, and the music never stops.

Stardust

The night my house burned down, one of the firefighters proudly handed me the soaking wet and badly burned ruin of my favorite banjo.

I loved this instrument. It was built to my exact specifications: maple and rosewood carved and shaped into a monster of a five-string banjo that was known to my students around the world. An instrument with over ten years of my blood, sweat, and tears soaked into the fretboard—the banjo I played as my Amy glided up the aisle to take my hand. Now it was just wet junk.

The firefighter looked at me with a big smile. He couldn't survey the damage to the banjo. He gave me a thumbs up. I flashed a very big smile to be kind, and he went running back into my still-burning home.

I sat down on the hood of my car. I tuned my trashed banjo as best I could, lit a cigarette, and took a drag, taking in the moment. My home was in ruins with everything I owned up in flames. Dad was across the street being doted upon by neighbors. My cats were safe in the backyard. I was soaking wet from the fire hoses. I strummed my once-beautiful banjo. The sound was awful, but workable. I started banging out a melody and threw back my head as I sang out in a roar. I was out of the way, helpless as everything I owned in this world went up in smoke, and I sang. I sang for the firefighters. I cracked corny jokes. I played happy old melodies and watched my home surrender to stardust.

I was still playing hours later when the last of the first responders had left.

It may seem strange to some, singing along to a ruined banjo as everything collapsed. But, if you think about it, a beat-up banjo and an old blues tune is a better reaction than crying. I mean, no amount of tears or prayer were going to put out those flames. I got my dad and the pets out safe. The firefighters did their jobs safely and got a few laughs from the banjo. The fire laid waste to my possessions, but losing things is no big deal.

I was alive, so I lived.

Good things happen and bad things happen. Life goes on.

When I was a child, the world seemed concrete and solid. I saw the world through eyes that did not yet understand change. The death of my first cat rocked me because it was my first taste of impermanence.

When I was nine, a tornado tore through southern Chester County, Pennsylvania, and I watched helplessly as ancient trees that had been growing long before William Penn roamed the area were ruthlessly torn from the ground and thrown across the road. I began to realize that nothing lasts forever.

The more I read, the more I lived and lost. With each loss came greater clarity: everything is just stardust.

The realization that we are stardust is nothing new. Carl Sagan played the concept like a fiddle, calling it 'star-stuff'. You can take the raw idea and fashion quotes suitable for museum gift shop tote bags or refrigerator magnets.

Still, singing in the glow of my burning home, the realization that everything that exists was once part of something else was comforting.

I met Amy just as I turned forty. While I had carried a few chaste and far-off crushes before, I had never been in love. Hell, I had never been properly kissed. I was old enough that I started to think love would never come into my life. Then, I laid eyes on Amy for the first time, and, in my head, Tom Petty started singing. It was "Here Comes My Girl." Loud as a cannon.

I did the only thing a forty-year-old martial artist turned folksinger could logically do when faced with such a poetic moment: I ran like hell.

I spent the rest of that long weekend workshop alternating between tending my students from around the world and hiding from this amazing woman.

What I did not know was that Amy was also dealing with love at first sight and trying to figure out how to talk to somebody she liked. Amy had been to a screening of Amélie. The in-your-face Frenchness of the movie inspired her to try an act of whimsy—to do something wild and crazy, like the adventures that led the character Amélie to love and personal growth. So, on the way home, she bought a banjo at the Salvation Army store in Manassas, Virginia.

Once Amy was home with her new and aggressively whimsical banjo, she went online and started looking for lessons. She wound up on my YouTube channel. After watching my videos for hours, Amy picked up the phone, called a friend, and said, "I think I'm gonna marry this banjo guy."

So, Amy traveled to my workshop, our eyes met, my face lit up in wonder as the awesome spirit of Tom Petty deemed our love groovy, and then she watched me run away.

Not a great first impression.

The rest of my banjo students, a group that came from around the world, watched this all take place like they were background characters in a romantic comedy. A few got together and told Amy to come to my next workshop; they would set me straight.

A few months later, at our next workshop, I was lured onto a seagoing catamaran for what was supposed to be a photography trip. Once we were too far out on the Chesapeake Bay for me to swim back, my hosts dropped anchor and refused to return me to dry land until I promised to ask Amy out.

Like I said, it was too far for me to swim back.

Our first date should have been a disaster. It was in early November, and a freak storm left us snowbound. I was trying to clear the snow off her car when I saw her beautiful face through the windshield. The storm was so heavy, the lights of Easton, Maryland, reflected back down, turning the storm clouds white.

White overhead, white snow piled on the ground all around me, and heavy snow in the air. For a moment, I could not tell up from down. It was like falling, but I was centered on her. I knew at that moment, in the cold, wild, spinning whiteness of the storm, that I wanted nothing on this earth but to be by her side.

We hiked through the deep snow to a Denny's. There was a shortcut we could have taken across some ice, but I knew it was too thin. Amy convinced me to try walking on the ice, and I fell into the freezing, brackish water on the second step. The Denny's was empty except for the staff. The hostess had a black eye, so Amy told her that I could teach her some self-defense if they let me dry my pants in the heat of the kitchen. As our cheeseburgers were prepared, I led the hostess and some of the staff in an

impromptu lesson on taking down a man—in my shorts, with Tom Petty singing every time I looked over at Amy's beautiful smiling face.

Early in our courtship, I wrote a banjo tune to express how I felt about Amy. I never told her about the song. I worked on it when we were apart.

We were visiting her mom on a lazy Sunday afternoon. The two of us were sprawled out on the couch like pandas after an epic lunch. I grabbed my banjo and started playing Amy's Waltz. A few bars into the song, Amy sat bolt upright and said, "I know that song. That's my song." We were married that October. Hundreds of banjo students sent Amy recordings of Amy's Waltz.

At night, I couldn't wear my hearing aids to bed. So, we developed our own silent language of touch. Three taps with the fingertips followed by a caress with the back of the hand meant, "I love you."

We had eight years together before she died. Lymphatic cancer. The love of my life was gone, surrendered to stardust.

Our relationship had been an adventure.

In 2013, the two of us went to the Skyline Drive. I was driving a 1989 Mercury Grand Marquis. The car was the size of Iowa. The road was steep and twisting. Amy insisted on my old beater for the trip because the front seat was a giant sofa. My wife loved using the center seatbelt so we could snuggle while taking in the majesty of the scenery.

While the Mercury was a great car, it was also old and worn out. The brakes creaked. The suspension groaned. The steering made me an unwilling participant in a game of chicken whenever a sharp turn came along. Amy happily took photographs and sang with the boombox I kept on the back seat. I maintained a poker face. My backside was chewing the seat in absolute terror.

I needed a break. We came along what looked like a little service road. I pulled over. It led to a cul-de-sac. There were a few picnic tables and a small dumpster. There was another car pulled over, a couple talking on their phones.

I stopped the rumbling old Mercury and pried my fingers from the wheel. I started to get out for a stretch. Amy stopped me and pointed to the hill on the edge of the road. Through the trees, a black bear strolled up to the dumpster, looking for tidbits.

It wasn't a large bear, but black bears can be dangerous at any size. I gently closed my car door. We gave the bear a moment to nose through the litter before getting ready to start the car. Amy did not even take pictures. We both knew that you don't mess with bears.

I was about to start the car when the doors of the other car flew open. The driver and passenger leaped out, yelling that there was a bee in the car.

My wife and I waved our arms to get their attention. "Stop! Shut up! There is a bear!"

We finally caught their eye. When they turned to see what we were pointing at, they ran back into the car. As soon as their car doors closed, they flew open again.

"Bee!"

"Bear!"

"Bee!"

"Bear!"

The screaming and running made the bear look up from its garbage du jour. It plopped down on its ample buttocks and looked our way. It is dangerous to associate human emotion with a predator. That said, I swear that this bear had an expression on its face, as if it were asking us, "Are you seeing this?"

It was a conundrum. On the one hand, we were terrified for the lives of these strangers—these dumb, dumb strangers. It was also the funniest thing either of us had ever seen. Hence, the conundrum.

My father raised me with two mottos. The first is: Noli nothis permittere te terere. That's Latin for "don't let the bastards grind you down." The second is: Always do the right thing, no matter the cost.

The situation was surreal from our vantage point. What if one of them is allergic to bees? What if they are so afraid that they can't understand danger? Aw, crap. Time to cowboy up.

I kissed my wife deeply—sweetly—and stepped out of the car. This was a risk, but I wanted to avoid seeing these people get mauled. Maintaining eye contact with the bear, I walked across the lot to the strangers' car. They had taken to cowering low down on the asphalt. At least the car was between them and the bear.

I kept my voice low and cheerful. "Howdy. I'm Patrick. That's my wife Amy over there."

Amy waved. They halfheartedly waved back.

"I'm going to shoo the bee out of your car."

I did not wait for a reply. It only took me a moment to jump into the vehicle and chase the bee out a window. I kept my eyes on the bear. The bear's bewildered expression remained the same.

I got the couple back into their car. The plan was to have them drive me back to my car, but they drove off without so much as a thank-you, leaving me out in the open with the bear, ass just swinging in the wind.

The bear shifted its weight. I shifted a bit myself.

If I was going to be bear chow, I might as well go out singing. I took my eyes off the bear, walked casually back to the Mercury, belting out The Streets of Laredo in a low baritone. Amy stuck her head out the window and sang along.

I made it to the car, dropping behind the wheel into Amy's arms.

"My hero," she purred.

We made out for so long that the bear got bored and left.

We had a whirlwind courtship. We danced in the kitchen as I sang Fats Waller songs. We were friends, lovers, partners, and foils. It wasn't a perfect relationship, but falling in love is a funny thing. You start out walking alone until you stumble across this other person. The two of you walk together for a time, and then you find yourself falling—tumbling down helplessly in awe of this person you have found. If you are lucky, your lover falls right along with you. In that moment, you catch each other. Then, you fly.

Amy and I flew for a time, then she was lost to me—but she wasn't lost to the world.

Stardust is constantly repurposed. Everything that is, was once part of something else. If I want to feel close to Amy, all I have to do is step outside. She is all around me—in the green grass and the snows of winter. If I were to return to the Skyline Drive, I would see her smile and grace in every bud and thorn.

Not just the landscape; I can look for a trace of Amy, and everyone else I have loved and lost, in the face of every stranger I meet. And in conversation, conflict, or consolation, honor that tiny fragment of Amy so that I can be thoughtful rather than reactive in word and action.

Grief and loss are inescapable. They are experiences that test us and change us. This does not mean I cannot find humor or song both in and through the pain. We can learn the lesson. We can let the stardust of our love and dreams slip through our fingers. We can still sing and laugh through it all in celebration for the moments of joy.

Life is a fleeting and fragile thing. Knowing this could have made me so overly careful that nothing happened in my life. Instead, I seize the moments as they come. Then, I sit on the edge of the Chesapeake and see everything and everyone I loved and lost, reflected in stardust.

Peach Kutchen

The first thing I do is drop a stick of butter into a frying pan. The oven gets set to 375°F. Then I toss the pan in the oven.

I could use a pie pan. For this recipe, in my humble opinion, cast iron gives a good crust on the edges. You'll see what I mean shortly. You will have to bear with me if any of this is counterintuitive. Pennsylvania Dutch cooking defies standard logic occasionally to achieve its deliciousness.

As the butter is melting in the warming oven, I grab the rest of the ingredients—a list I know by heart. One cup each of flour and sugar, two teaspoons of baking powder, and a dash of salt. Mix in a bowl with around three-quarters cup of milk.

Then I open a can of peaches—no sugar added, of course.

When the oven reaches temperature and the butter melts, I take the pan out of the oven. Then the batter is poured over and into the melted butter. I arrange the canned peaches in a clockwork pattern atop the mixture.

Now it's time to toss the pan into the oven for forty minutes. Enough time to clean up and make myself a mug of tea, then curl up someplace and let the hot mug warm my hands.

Kutchen was a Pennsylvania Dutch staple. In the old days, this simple recipe was usually prepared before bedtime and served cold for breakfast. Canned rather than fresh fruit became part of the taste; home preserves were what was available back then. The soft baked dough and canned fruit happen to pair with the crust formed by baking the dish in a pan full of butter. It became traditional.

I once made the mistake of using frozen peaches for a kutchen. My father was not a happy camper; the fruit was too firm for him. Back to old-fashioned canned from then on.

Kutchen is not cobbler, crisp, or even slump. It is not even German Kuchen. Those other recipes are fine and dandy. The thing is, Pennsylvania Dutch kutchen is unique in ways that are hard to grasp until you sit down and have a slice.

I prefer to eat kutchen while it is fresh out of the oven, with the butter sizzling. Hot kutchen with a glass of cold milk is about as close to heaven as you can get in this life.

If I can't find canned peaches, fresh blueberries and lemon zest work well. Fresh cherries are also tasty, even if pitting the fruit is a chore. My mother said rhubarb was also a traditional choice. My grandfather was fond of pointing out that rhubarb is great for cleaning out your pipes. Perchance, it would be wise to hold off on the rhubarb kutchen before a long drive.

Mom taught me how to make kutchen. It was in her recipe box, but she shared this with me in the same way that I have passed it on to you. It was never a list of ingredients, but a sort of kitchen poem.

On gloomy days I came home sad or beat up from school, she would have a kutchen in the oven long before my tale of woe was even halfway through. She always acted as if it was nothing; to me, it was everything.

When my wife and I were still newlyweds, one of Amy's friends had an emergency. While she cared for her pal, I scooped up a crying baby. Singing Irish folk songs in my low baritone, cradling the now-cooing child in my left arm while I cleaned the kitchen, I baked a kutchen. Then I made a big pot of tea and served everybody, singing to the baby the entire time.

The ladies present watched me with a bewildered expression. They would have been less surprised to see a Russian circus bear on a unicycle doing housework. I had to explain to them a couple of times that I grew up in a Pennsylvania Dutch kitchen. Caring for others is what we do. It's what my Aunt Mannie taught me. That was a good day. Home cooking creates so many opportunities for joy.

I should also note that my skills in the kitchen have limits. The first time I cooked dinner for my then-fiancee... Well, I set her kitchen on fire. Full-on flames and billows of smoke. As I was running in circles waving a flaming oven mitt, she was on the phone. I thought she had dialed 911. Instead, she called my parents.

Amy: "My kitchen is on fire. He set my kitchen on fire." Mom: (laughing and unsurprised) "He's your problem now!"

The fire was promptly extinguished. The dinner was darn near perfect, barring the scent of oven mitt flambé still wafting. As I was cleaning up the mess, she kissed me. Back to the task at hand.

By now, my kitchen is clean. I have my cup of tea and the timer is about to go off. I stick a knife into the dessert. If no crumbs stick to the blade, I know it is ready.

Now it is time to drag the pan out of the oven. Cut a slice while the caramelized butter is still singing and sizzling along the edges. The dough is fluffy and light. The peaches are soft and sweet. The crust's caramelized sugar and butter is crunchy. I savor the taste, flooded with memories of hundreds of treats shared with loved ones in the kitchen.

I always wait until I have a taste before I tell anybody the kutchen is ready. That is terrible of me, I know. In my defense, family and friends will descend on a fresh-baked peach kutchen like buzzards on a gut wagon. In moments, the pan will be empty. This is a good thing. It is right and proper to nourish people we care about. You also don't want to eat more than a slice of kutchen at one time. After all, it's a sugary fruit pancake baked over an entire stick of butter! One slice is enough.

The added benefit of being left to clean the kutchen pan is that I get to gobble the bits of buttery crust stuck to the pan. Oh, it's good!

I hope you give this recipe a try. Work the ingredients together. Think about the farmers who raised the wheat, peaches, milk, and butter. So many delivery services are required to bring good things like butter and flour to your table. Farmers and truck drivers made that happen, so give them a thought, even a prayer. Some of the best people I have met were either farmers or truck drivers.

As you bake, take in the scent and texture of the mixture as you work. Feel the heat from the oven. The comfort of your kitchen and home. These are all good things that we buzz by in our daily rush.

This is a good recipe to practice. Guests are often charmed by this alchemy of simple ingredients and a hot pan full of butter. Throwing a kutchen together while doting on a friend is good for both parties. We all need to care for people. We all need the solace of having someone care for us.

Humble canned peaches, sugar, flour, butter, a dash of salt, and milk. A simple recipe from my childhood that has warmed my body and soul for as long as I remember. I hope you bake a kutchen for the people you love. Just think to snag yourself a slice before ringing the dinner bell. This stuff goes fast!

The Bubble

He called himself The King. I do not think Elvis would approve.

The King was a talent agent—at least, that was his con. He made bank selling recording time. It was all a scam, and I was having a blast playing along.

My father and I were performing as The God Knows We Tried String Band. Years onstage together had taught us to communicate almost silently—a skill we were using to play The King like a fiddle. We had him thinking the two of us were dumb enough to pay thousands of dollars to record a single in some fetid basement studio. We were having almost too much fun.

The King, thinking he had hooked a pair of marks, went into a sales pitch to be my agent. In his ramble, he blurted out something I will never forget.

"Son, you need me as your agent. You need protection. Everybody else in the world is protected by a bubble about thirty-six inches in diameter. They don't see or care about anything outside that bubble. You ain't got no bubble! You're just out there. Open and vulnerable."

My father's jaw dropped almost to the floor.

The King saw me. My carefully constructed stagecraft of playing the comic foil and saying, "aw, shucks" when complimented about my musician skills had been laid bare. He saw the thing about me that terrified my dad: I ain't got no bubble.

I have not had a wild life because I am special in any way. In fact, my dad called me an idiot every day for fifty-four years—in Philadelphia's Irish Catholic households, ball-busting is seen as nurturing without the touchy-feely shit. My self-image is sometimes a mess.

My one superpower, and greatest weakness, is that I don't live in a bubble.

So what is this bubble The King spoke of?

Best way I can put it is this: the bubble is our circle of inclusion—the sights, sounds, and thoughts we allow to reach us. Everything else, we try to tune out.

Some hucksters blame the Internet and social media for this bubble, but that's a bunch of bullshit. People were ignoring their spouses by reading the paper at breakfast during the Revolutionary War. Technology helps us maintain our bubbles, but if any of us were stuck on a desert island with another person, we would suddenly develop an obsession with coconuts to distance ourselves. "Can't talk right now. I need to study coconuts."

The bubble gives us the illusion of safety and the comfort of familiarity.

In 1915, Edwin Markham wrote Outwitted. Four lines of poetic brilliance that explain the bubble and the solution for it better than anybody has before or since:

He drew a circle that shut me out— Heretic, a rebel, a thing to flout. But Love and I had the wit to win: We drew a circle that took him in!

So, three years ago, my house burned down. Lost everything and had a financial meltdown at the same time. I bounced around a bit and recently landed in an '80s single-wide trailer. The park is a nice place, but I'm a Generation X widowed male. I owned a murky old sofa and ate over the kitchen sink in

my underwear. The place was empty and grim just as the concussions from car accidents and a lifetime of fighting are catching up to me.

Then, Brenda came along. Just showed up asking to rent my spare bedroom. She's a tough retired nurse from Smith Island. Widowed. Heartbroken. Most of all, she can help me as the CTE drops me to the floor with seizures or when I get confused.

Rent? Hell. Just move in.

Right now, she is in the kitchen making brownies with her granddaughter, dancing to Lynyrd Skynyrd. The house has been transformed into a Smith Island cottage. The fried chicken is bitchin'.

If I had retreated into my grief, if I had turned this unique stranger away from my door, my life would be much emptier. Now I have a home, and a friend. We lean on each other.

The King saw something in me that scared my dad witless. It's not that I don't have a bubble. It's just that my bubble is so big it takes in everything. Sure, that leaves me sometimes exposed to the dangers of the world—I've taken more beatings than Rocky Balboa—but I have also had an amazing life.

Years ago, I was at a jam session and I noticed this older lady off by herself. She was dressed like Minnie Pearl got drunk and raided Stevie Nicks' wardrobe. Enough costume jewelry to sink a battleship. Smoking a cigarette and leaning over a battered Gibson guitar. People were passing her by, but the wear on her guitar caught my attention.

There is wear and tear, and then there is playing wear. The steel strings of the guitar wear into the frets and fretboard. Oils from your hands stain the wood. Fingers and picks scratch the surface. Play guitar long enough, and you can read most of a musician's biography from the playing wear on their instrument.

This lady? Her guitar was telling me wild stories before I even walked up to her.

So, I sat down and introduced myself. I was a strong musician at this point, and I was just trying to be nice—make the lady feel welcome.

Turns out her name was Lonnie Lynne LaCour, and she was something of a country music legend. Lonnie played bass for Patsy Cline and Roy Clark. She also formed an all-girl band to perform for the troops in Vietnam, and when she came home, rode with the Pagan's Motorcycle Club. She was a walking-talking library of country music, and people were just passing her by.

Lonnie became a friend, collaborator, mentor, and supporter for almost twenty years. She taught me licks, shared some wild stories, and gave me a deep insight into the history of my craft. All of that knowledge she shared with me and the adventures we had together were sparked by simply introducing myself.

When I wrote The How and the Tao of Old-Time Banjo, I came up with a crazy idea for the book signing tour. Instead of reading from the book, my father and I taught banjo for free all day. Just set up a row of banjos and gave lessons to everyday folks in Barnes & Noble and other book stores up and down the East Coast.

Well, Lonnie came to every book signing. She never missed one, no matter how far from home. She said that old-timers should support old-timers. It was always an honor to have her there, and it was a blast watching her teach kids banjo and guitar.

Then there was Edgar Stanistreet. A man with doctorates in music and physics who actually jammed with Picasso. Edgar would improvise on the mandolin to inspire the great artist to do the same on canvas. He also played on the Doctor Zhivago soundtrack. When I met him, Edgar was just a street musician who spent most of his time entertaining kids in hospitals.

Edgar taught me that the key to understanding the universe was mathematics, music, and the laughter of children.

He also more or less forced me through inspiration to dig into music theory. It was quite a jump going from my more or less sound-through-vibration approach to something that could be expressed on paper. When I took a community college music theory class, I literally drove the professor to tears. He said I was a brilliant banjo player. Maybe a genius. But a terrible fucking musician. Edgar helped me finally see the logic and patterns I was missing, and I walked away a better musician – and a better man.

There is more, so much more. I have met so many inspiring/supporting/dubious/scary people that I lost count ages ago. I can't remember all of their names, but their faces and lessons are burned into my heart.

In science fiction, there is a lot of daydreaming about exploring unknown worlds and dimensions. When I want to do that, I just have a conversation with a stranger.

I met so many people when I was roaming the streets, turning Philly into the tough version of The School of Athens. They came in rags and tuxedos. Each of them convinced they were alone, unwanted. We found each other, shared with each other, and it was only hard in taking that first step of introducing myself.

One of my treasured memories of training with Ed Parker was the way he introduced himself. This was a mountain of a man—physically imposing with a baritone voice that carried deep wisdom. This is a guy who spent serious time with Elvis and fought Bruce Lee. A grandmaster of the martial arts, and his first question when you met him was usually, "Can I help you?"

In other words, this master was putting himself into service. All of his hard training and accolades, and his first question is to ask if he can help in some way. That really blew my mind. It taught me to see my interactions with people were a two-way street. I wasn't just there to learn; I was there to help—to become a link in the chain.

The thing I keep noticing, and it drives me bat-shit crazy, is that people walk around in the bubble that The King described. Everybody feels alone and disconnected while, the whole time, we are surrounded by opportunities for joy. You just have to reach out, to run the risk of dismissal, and find the courage to reach out completely as yourself.

Sure, that moment of reaching out is terrifying. Fear of rejection can make starting a conversation a herculean task. The trick is to use Ed Parker's ass-kicking example and start by offering to be of help. To be of service. In other words, instead of roaming the world from a perspective of what benefits you, look for little needs you can fill. Where you can step in for just a moment offering help, and using that as an opening for a conversation.

The downside to being open to everybody and everything is that you are also wide open to danger. My father's hair went prematurely gray watching my adventures. Fighting adults in the ring as a kid and diving into impossible adventures as a teenager. Even as adult, I spent two years making myself an open

source resource. I would teach anywhere in the world for free as long as my room and board was covered.

On paper, this sounds like a harmless, whimsical premise.

In reality, it was brutal.

Endless bus trips across America. The Norwegian ferry boat that turned into a wild orgy when we hit international waters ("Duty free" is a phrase that can cause me to run screaming into the night). The eyeball-scorching sight of a house cat spraying my first-ever Chicago deep-dish pizza. The guy who told me the same story for three hours straight while his daughter with filed teeth making her look like Jaws sang the same gospel song over and over again. Circling the Autobahn for two solid days with no food because my driver, after having a bit too much fun on the aforementioned Norwegian Orgy Boat, suddenly not only forgot how to speak English, but who I was and where we were going. The burned bricks of Dresden surrounding me with past trauma as I discovered I had no cash and every credit card in my wallet had expired. Getting stitched up by a kindly old lady in the back of a taco truck in Kansas. Dad watched me head out hopeful, come home beat to shit, and heading out hopeful again the next day.

I loved my dad with all my heart, but his bubble only extended to me and mom. I wanted the whole world.

Blackberries and Honeysuckle

"Wait... Is that a path?"

Amy peered where I was pointing. If you looked closely enough, there was a deer path in the waist-high grass off the curb.

The picnic grounds at Manassas Battlefield National Park were around the corner from our apartment. It was a quiet place Amy and I could go for a quiet evening snack, feeling far away from the traffic and noise of Northern Virginia. We both loved the spot, but there was nothing exactly special about it: a parking lot and some picnic tables. Not much else.

I climbed out of the car without a word. Amy fretted for a moment before cautiously joining me at the beginning of the path.

She knew I was going to follow the trail. There was no way I could walk away without peeking. She said that we would get covered with ticks walking through the grass.

I arched my eyebrows. "Checking each other over when we get home is the best part of the hike."

I kissed her and took her hand. We walked into the grass, laughing.

The grass was high enough to obscure our view in some spots. We made jokes about The African Queen, taking turns with bad Bogart and Hepburn impressions as we marched through the brush.

After a short distance, we found ourselves at the edge of a small pond, invisible from the parking lot, ringed by cattails buzzing with dragonflies and damselflies. Lily pads dotted the dark water.

Frogs chirped and darted about. A willow tree stood on the far edge, across from us. In the branches caressing the water, a green heron was fishing.

Amy kissed me happily. We could have sat there forever. It was peaceful and beautiful and almost perfect.

The trail did not stop at the pond. It continued through the grass. Amy knew I wanted to go further before I said a word. We held hands and walked on.

The picnic grounds fell out of view behind us. We came to the fragments of an old farm fence lined with pine trees. A hedgerow had sprung up along the fence. Songbirds flitted among the blackberries and honeysuckle.

We fed each other blackberries, kissed with lips sweetened with honeysuckle blossom. She wore wildflowers in her hair, lounging in a little clearing that the deer must have trampled down. Another nearly perfect place, hidden away from view, just around the bend from home.

Still, the path went on.

Amy led this time, dragging me by the hand through milkweed and thistle, our socks catching cockle burrs. Still, the trail had brought us to two magical spots. We had to see it to its end.

The trail ended on the banks of a still creek, perhaps a spur of Young's Branch. Wide but shallow, the water moved at a languid pace. Fish swam through the clear water. The air was cooler here. Maybe it was the shade or the breeze over the water. Tall trees lined the banks, with one fallen tree crossing the stream. A great blue heron crept into the brush, hoping to continue its daily fishing away from our view. The air was awash in the music of songbirds. Tree swallows darted around us, as if in welcome. A

hornet's nest hissed from an overhead branch, as if in warning. Bobbing wildflowers were alive with bees and hummingbirds.

Amy was entranced. It was almost a cathedral of nature, only a stone's throw from the highway.

She asked me if I knew about this place before we started the trail.

I didn't have to answer. She knew me well enough to know. I never plan farther ahead than my next step.

I joked that deer are smarter than folks sometimes admit.

I took her in my arms and sang old love songs. We danced alongside the creek. We scampered along the fallen tree to sit with our bare feet in the icy water. The heron did not seem to mind.

As we walked back to the car, we came upon a small herd of deer. They ignored us. We watched them graze for a bit. They jumped off into the tall grass. Tawny coats blended in with the green and golden grass until they vanished.

Amy's hair in the sunshine was breathtaking.

That path and the sights along it became our place. A place we went to escape and picnic in a world all our own. Amy could sit all afternoon watching red-winged blackbirds argue among the cattails. We spent many hours sitting with our feet dangling from the fallen tree, our feet cold from the stream and my heart on fire from the slightest smile or touch of her hand. I often brought my ukulele or the old banjo, putting on private concerts for Amy and any wildlife that happened by.

To anybody driving by, it was a parking lot with some picnic tables.

I won't say that every path we took led to such magical memories. The thing about whimsy is that you sometimes fall on your face. For every adventure leading to moments of transcendental beauty, you take about fifty pratfalls.

When it goes right, when the path seems faint and hard to follow, take your lover by the hand and go. Just go. Take it all in. Every bit of it. In cold February, nothing warms the heart like memories of kisses sweetened by blackberry and honeysuckle.

Sometimes You Suck, and Sometimes You Blow

The first thing you do is get yourself a harmonica.

Specifically, you want a diatonic ten-hole harmonica in a major key. If you want to get all nerdy on us, you want a ten-hole Richter-tuned diatonic harmonica in any of the twelve major keys.

The brand is unimportant. Just go to a music store and ask for "a ten hole diatonic harp."

Seasoned harmonica players call their instruments harps. Now you already know a little of the lingo before you blow a note.

If you can, choose your harp in the key of G major, C major, or D major.

There are other keys, but that is not important right now. Explaining that would require music theory, and that stuff is dandy—but this lesson is going to tap you into an oral tradition where terminology and method are abandoned in favor of learning by sound, feel, and experimentation. The goal here is not to learn a single song on your harp. It is to begin the process of becoming a musician. Stick with it, and your grandchildren will dance at your feet someday marveling at how easily you seem to play any instrument.

Now, before you rush out enthusiastically to buy that first harp, I'll warn you in advance that the harmonica market is highly specialized. There are harps that can play in any key, harps that have specific orchestral roles, harps that are super high or low in pitch, and even harps that sound like several instruments at once. It can be bewildering at first, so keep it simple. A ten-hole diatonic harp in the key of G, C, or D is all you need.

Once you have the instrument, we can begin.

Holding your harmonica so that the lowest note in pitch is to the left and the high notes to the right, find someplace comfortable to flop for a while. There is no posture or form to worry about. This isn't like the guitar or banjo where there is a bunch of left and right hand technique to fuss about. All that matters is your breath and your harmonica.

Hell. If you can't hold the harp with your hands, just get a harmonica rack. Be like Bob Dylan, only you're gonna play in tune.

Now look at your harp. Your instrument may have numbers on top. Ignore them. First, once the harp is all up in your grill, you won't be able to see those numbers with your nose in the way. Second, I don't want you to think about music as numbers.

Music is a language. It is not something you memorize or recite—it is something you create as you go. A melody (the part of a song you can hum) is just an outline—a suggestion—that can be crafted into endless variation. The only trick to this musical fluency is that you have to think of music in terms of tones that you sing or speak through your instrument.

Now, hold your harp and take a close look at it.

A harmonica is basically just a baloney sandwich that can carry a tune. You've got a top and bottom cover, metal reed plates, and the comb (the part with the holes) sandwiched in between. Take in the feel of the instrument in your hands. What brand is it? What color is it?

My favorite harmonica right now is a Suzuki Pure Harp. It's all rosewood except for the brass reed plates. I love it because I can feel the wood resonate in my hands. I'm such a fan, I wrote Suzuki about

how much I love my harp and the deep respect I have for the craftsmen who make these wonderful instruments. Somebody at Suzuki wrote back that they read my letter to the entire crew. That connection created by simply reaching out makes me smile every time I pick up my harp.

Your harp, whatever the brand or model, is your musical instrument. Get to know it, because you are going to be spending a lot of time with it.

Put the harp to your mouth. How does it feel up against your lips? Now exhale gently into the harp. Don't worry about what tone to blow. Just breathe into one or more holes.

How does it sound? How does the harp feel in your hands?

Now inhale through the same spot on the harp. Notice the difference in sound and feel?

Now run up and down the harp a bit. Try playing groups of notes (chords) and single notes. Experiment with volume. Don't play so hard that you mess up your reeds, but don't be timid.

Experiment with raising and lowering the volume by the amount of air you blow or draw through the instrument.

The goal at this moment is not to achieve anything. There is no goal and there sure as hell is no pressure.

What I want you to do right now is both the delightfully childish act of simply playing with your harmonica and the very adult act of being entirely present in the moment. Drink it all in. How you feel, how the instrument reacts to your breath, and the sounds reaching your ear. Then, take it a step further and take in your surroundings.

I was seven when mom gifted me my first real harmonica. A Hohner Marine Band 1896/20. Shining bright silver in its gloriously complicated cardboard box. Hunkering down close, so I could read her lips, my mother said, "This is music. If you have music, you can go anywhere in the world and you will never be alone."

I could not know then the staggering truth and wisdom of her words.

Don't stop playing around with your harp. In fact, search around and experiment with making a soundtrack to the memory I just shared with you.

Don't stop there. Look around you. Search for chords and notes that create little songs for everyone and everything you see.

When I first tried to play my harmonica, it was a shocking experience. The only thing that came close was the summer before when the Kiddie Gang introduced me to rock 'n' roll. When the thugs in the gang found out I was deaf, they dragged me into some house. I think they might have broken in. The place had a massive high-end sound system. Bruce Johnston Jr. laid me flat on the floor while his goons set up these epic speakers on either side of my head. They blasted Kiss' Love Gun at full volume with my head squished between the speakers. It was like flying.

When we climbed out of the windows and headed back into Marshallton, the boys from the Kiddie Gang slaughtered a duck with a rock. It was a mallard, and waddled up to us. I tried to stop them, and wept bitterly for the duck. Then, they beat me up for crying over a duck. They laughed the entire time.

I never did listen to Kiss again.

That's the funny thing about life. The moments that change and shape you can come wrapped up in good things or bad. I got home that day beaten senseless, but for a brief time I was flying as the power of rock 'n' roll washed over me– and that first encounter with the harp was the same. The possibilities seemed endless.

Getting started was the mystery.

My first step was to do what I have you doing right now: I played.

At first, I just made random sounds. That was thrilling because I could hear my harmonica. Then, I started exploring. I had no clue how to start, so I started familiarizing myself with the tones of the instrument.

I would wander the deep woods of Chester County, Pennsylvania, and just make sounds. Exploring. Looking for patterns or some key to figuring out my harp.

Like water, I wandered down to the low places, straight into a hippie encampment on the banks of the Brandywine river.

Back to your harmonica for a moment. After playing around with random notes and feeling around for patterns for a bit, I want you to start blowing and drawing chords.

A chord is just a group of three notes. So, naturally, blowing and drawing chords on your harp requires working three holes at once. Give it a shot.

I'll keep talking while you are playing. Keep you company. You will discover as you meet fellow musicians in your travels that there is nothing quite like a conversation while making music or swapping licks. You just fall into the ease of ease while the stories and songs take you someplace good and peaceful.

So, I wound up in an actual hippie encampment. President Carter had not yet pardoned the young men who ran from the draft during the Vietnam War. They lived on the margins. In hiding.

The camp was made up of improvised shelters. Tents, shacks cobbled together from scavenged materials, and a couple of vans.

It's funny looking back now because nobody in the camp seemed to be surprised to see a young boy step out of the woods trying to play a harmonica. I wandered around watching people cook over fires, strum guitars, and there was even a weaver working a small loom. I got into a conversation with the fiber artist about my mother's homespun yarn. Then somebody pulled me away, sat me down, and taught me how to teach myself the harmonica.

He was a young man. I guess he was in his early twenties. Lean from going hungry but muscled from hard work, with green eyes and long blond hair under a floppy leather hat. He smelled like the Brandywine.

We sat down together in the dark green Chester County grass. He played a few melodies and blues riffs to show off, then he stashed his harp and told me to do the same.

Now, rather than recount that first lesson blow-by-blow, I think it would be better for us to continue on with our lesson. You see, this was not a music lesson in the way you might be thinking. This was my introduction to the oral tradition school of North American folk music.

Now, stash your harp and sound out the major scale. Sing, "Do, re, mi, fa, so, la, ti, do."

Yes. I said sing.

If you are unfamiliar with the sounds of 'do, re, mi', just look for the song of the same name from The Sound of Music.

If you are wondering why on earth a harmonica lesson involves singing, bear in mind that this lesson is on how to teach yourself the instrument.

After I got my start on the harp, and a few other things, from my hippie friends, I took the instrument everywhere with me. I started stumbling across old-timers willing to share a few licks and tunes with me. Since we were coming from different backgrounds and playing levels, they didn't know the same songs I did – but they could always play along if I sang the melody. "Kid, if you sing it, I can find it on the harp."

The hippies started me singing 'do, re, mi' and searching for it on my harp as a way to train my ears. Rather than memorize notes or stare furiously over my nose hopelessly trying to see the numbers stamped on the top of my harp, using my voice as a guide to the harmonica taught me musical fluency.

The truth is, I can't teach you harmonica. What I can do is give you the tools (the 'do, re, mi') to discover the harp on your own.

Sing the scale, then search around to chord it out on the harp. Once you discover the pattern (and you will), start singing folk songs and then sounding them out on the harmonica.

It won't be easy at first. Nothing good ever is. You have to stumble around a little bit. Get frustrated to the point of quitting, and then keep going.

Eventually, you will fall into the ease of ease. You will stop worrying about your voice when you sing. The self-consciousness will fall away and the music will just start to flow.

The hippies got me started. I played constantly until I found my way with the harp. I got good enough that my grandfather started to notice. Pretty soon, the old goat was dragging me to nursing homes so that I could play the harp for his friends.

Those initial visits were not easy. I would get so scared when Pop-pop had me play for his friends that my knees would shake. The sights, sounds, and smell of the nursing home would overwhelm me and I would run away to hide in my grandfather's Dodge Dart.

Pop-pop would drag me back by the collar and the seat of my pants, give me a kick up the ass, and the show would go on.

At first, I thought Pop-pop was just being mean. Eventually, I began to understand what was happening. The people we were visiting were lonely. They didn't care if I was any good on the harp; they were just grateful that somebody showed up.

Once I lost the stage fright, I understood why Pop-pop was literally dragging me places to play my harmonica. As he put it, "You are bringing a little bit of sunshine to a very dark place".

Once I stopped being shy, the harmonica seemed to just open up for me. As I became familiar with the sounds of my harp, I stopped searching for notes. I stopped stopping when I made a mistake and just kept the music flowing.

At the hippie camp, we sang old folk songs. Skip to my Lou, The Streets of Laredo, and Shenandoah. Playing for the old folks at nursing homes or the coffee klatch at McDonald's, I started

expressing my emotions through my voice and the harp. I sang, danced, cracked jokes, and even started picking up some sleight of hand skills. It dawned upon me that by performing I could keep shining that light my grandfather spoke of. I also found myself getting a lot of advice from the old-timers I met.

Sing it with me: "Do, re, mi, fa, so, la, ti, do".

Don't get all shy and say you can't sing. You have a voice; you just need to learn how to use it. Train your voice with your harmonica and vice versa.

I'm willing to bet you have a song. Something that was sung to you when you were young. Something that takes you back, or something that makes you take a step back.

When I was small, my song was The Streets of Laredo. I would blow a few chords on the harp to tune my ear, so to speak, and then I would sing, taking instrumental breaks on the harp.

At first, my singing and harmonica playing were awful. My hearing loss and profound lack of this imaginary thing called talent, I spent what felt like forever singing out of tune and generating raw discord with my harmonica. The hippies started venturing to dad's hoagie shop to beg and barter for food. We would jam in the parking lot over mugs of deliciously smoky Lapsang Souchong tea. We would sing old folk songs and play harmonica, guitar, wash tub bass, and more and girls in patchwork dresses danced.

The support from my hippie pals made me brave enough to take my harmonica with me everywhere.

With Pop-pop dragging me around in addition to my wanderings, I got so wrapped up in the adventures that came with making music that I overlooked how my technique and musicianship developed.

One day, I was struggling to play do, re, mi.

The next, I was playing chord progressions as hippie girls sang.

One day, I was roughly blowing chords.

The next, I was playing single note melodies.

One day, music was this massive confounding and terrifyingly complex thing.

The next, I could find any melody on my harp and pick up the rhythm by counting in threes or fours.

One day, I was just sucking and blowing air through the harmonica.

The next, I was controlling the airflow through the harp with my breath while using my tongue, or saying words like 'toil' on the blow or the draw, to shape the note or chord I was playing. Literally singing through the harp almost as an extension of my voice.

None of these things happened overnight. It took years, but, because I was playing, the time did not seem long from my perspective. Even when I was terrible, when I was blindly hunting and pecking chords and notes I not only could not name, but knew more by feel rather than the actual sounds of the tones, even then just attempting to play brought me so much joy that I lost all track of time.

I figure it will go that way for you. You'll start out singing do, re, mi and feeling all lost until you find the patterns. Once you have that, the music will never stop. If you only play for your own enjoyment, not even playing a hymn at a church social, or become a world-famous entertainer performing shows at

Vegas renowned for both ace musicianship and needless nudity, the end will be the same: with you sitting knee-to-knee with another person teaching them the do, re, mi, just the same as I taught you.

This is music. Right now, it may be this seemingly random search for do, re, mi. Given time, practice, and interaction with other musicians, it becomes a language of natural fluency.

While it is true that you can't order a cup of coffee with music, you can, however, share how a cup of coffee feels to you. Not with words, images, or any other concrete form of communication. You can get it with nothing more than notes from your harp – or even just your voice.

Do that well enough, and somebody will up and buy you a cup of coffee. I should know. It's happened to me more than a few times.

Remember that freezing night I spent on the curb in Dresden after the Norwegian ferry debacle? I must have looked a sight. A bedraggled American with a face punched into Picasso dimensions in street fights playing banjo on the curb next to a crazed Norwegian who was secretly planning on sacrificing me to Thor.

Anyway, some passer-by bought me a curry-wurst and a cone filled with french fries draped in mayonnaise. The curry-wurst just about turned me inside-out. Might as well have been Drano. I found myself a sweaty crying mess in the men's room of a hostel thinking things could not get worse, the restroom was suddenly mobbed by old football fans barfing cider all over everything.

I'm pretty sure that was the moment I decided international travel was over for me, but the moment that person bought me the curry-wurst? That was golden – and golden moments are sometimes sandwiched between moments with murderous Norwegians and moments of being violently ill while cursing old German football fans vomit cider all around you. The trick is to take it all in, the good and the bad, and put it all into your music.

People like to argue if the glass is half-empty or half-full. As a musician, I learned to be amazed just to have a glass. If that glass has something in it to pass around? Great. If not? Give us a few tunes and somebody will fill up our glass.

The hippies did not just teach me how to teach myself harmonica. That next Christmas, dad had gone broke. We didn't have money for food. That was the first time I ever saw my dad cry.

Well, the hippies got word that we were going hungry. One night, they showed up in this funky old van with bald tires and cartoonish clouds of weed smoke billowing out of the windows. They spirited my mom and dad back to their camp for a wild banquet of wild game. Pheasant, raccoon, squirrel, and black bear. One of the hippies tried to boast about taking down the bear, but it was just roadkill.

After a huge meal and packing up some to take home to me, the hippies, to thank my parents for feeding them so often, presented mom and dad with a huge basket of groceries. They had gone out busking for days, maybe weeks, to raise money for those groceries.

On the top of the groceries was a handmade mountain dulcimer. A gift for me. Attached was a note that read: "This is a harmonica with strings."

For reasons I want you to experience on your own, the jump from harmonica to dulcimer was natural. It forced me to learn more about rhythm, and that not only forced me to become a better musician, it also led to other instruments like the autoharp, concertina, ukulele, and, eventually the five-string banjo and guitar.

My first frailing banjo lesson took place with me swapping the banjo back and forth with Elizabeth Cotten and Peggy Seeger. I learned the secrets of Travis-style guitar from an old moonshiner who traded his wares for lessons from Merle Travis himself. They sat with me same as I am sitting with you now. Pete Seeger dubbed this the folk process, but it is actually something older than names. A chain of sharing a language called music.

It's also bigger than music. The way we approached the harmonica can be applied to any discipline. Start with a basic technique, spend time exploring through play, and then head out your front door. From there, the craft and the people you need will guide you. Not always where you want to go, but to the place you needed to find.

Music never took me to the places I wanted to visit. Instead it took me, kicking and screaming, to the places I needed to go. That night in Dresden started rough and ended with me cheering on some strange soccer team with a bunch of drunken old Germans who found my Philly accent so so hilarious (Asking, "Patrick! Say 'water' and 'towels' again!") that I got free food and shelter until my banjo students finally found me and got the tour, such as it was, back on schedule.

Life doesn't go according to plan simply because the random depth and beauty of the world is simply too big for any human mind to completely grasp. In both music and martial arts, I was taught to improvise and flow because relying on memory gets your ass beat.

The great John Popper once joked that "Life is like a harmonica. Sometimes you suck, and sometimes you blow." There is a great deal of truth in this, not just in terms of harmonica mechanics, but in the seemingly endless ways the learning process will provide a harp student the opportunity to show the world their entire ass.

Start by drawing air through and out your harp. Look for the do, re, mi in chords and single notes. Sing songs and find the melody on your instrument. Play for and with people every chance you get, no matter how godawful you imagine yourself to be.

It is only music. Mistakes can be played through; colossal failure can be marketed as jazz. The trick is to play. To live. To sing with your whole voice so that you feel the air rumble in your chest and warm cold hearts around you.

I've shared with you. So, go on now. Work on that for a while. You are a musician now, that was official the moment you tried. The rest is just a matter of really, truly, madly living as you explore this amazing instrument.

The Dance

I'd be in the kitchen cooking dinner. I was a beast in the kitchen, cooking phở from scratch or something as close to coq au vin as you can get without a rooster. She would slip up behind me and slide into my arms as gentle as anything I have known in my hard life. I was used to being hit, and this level of intimacy was more than new to me. But I was drawn to her like a honeybee to a rose. I had no defense she could not waltz through.

We would kiss deeply, and then I would begin to sing. Our bodies would sway and slide into the rhythm. We would dance to the music we made together, graceful in a way only old lovers can achieve.

We started slowly. I did set her kitchen on fire the first time I cooked for her. So, in the early days of our marriage we danced tentatively.

It's funny. At forty years old, I had made music for thousands of dancers. Controlled the rhythm and the beat that made people sway and move their bodies together from the stage without taking part myself beyond tapping my foot or doing a little dance for comic effect while playing.

Amy changed that. Now my massive lumbering and battered body, my hands that knew real violence, were confronted by something so beautiful, so fragile, that it initially terrified me. Amy danced me through that.

Our initial tentative dance steps improved, as everything does, with repetition and time. As we learned each other's bodies, our dance steps grew bolder and more natural.

We eventually took it out of the kitchen. Shopping malls, parking lots, grocery stores, and even highway rest stops all found the two of us dancing to our own music.

Again, it's funny. I'm not exactly shy. I embrace life. Still, Fast Eddie and some of my other mentors taught me to blend in when I'm offstage. Dropping my grocery bags, sweeping my beautiful wife into my arms, and kicking off a dance, belting old love songs while people gawked or took videos was a pretty big jump for me. Amy loved it, so I dropped my armor and let the whole world see that we loved each other.

As we danced, as I sang, the old love songs started to make sense. I had been singing them since I was seven. Now, I had to sing louder, clearer, enunciating the words and drawing on the full range of my baritone voice. It was different from singing with the banjo or guitar laying down the rhythm and adding little twinkles. To make this work, I had to learn how to croon a cappella. Project the song, connect to the lyrics, and use my voice while staying connected to my amazing dance partner.

It gave me an entirely new understanding both of music and the grace that comes from surrendering to repetition until the act becomes unconscious and natural.

You can be the best technical musician in the world, but, if you have never been on the dance floor, you don't know shit.

Amy taught me that.

In heavy parkas, feet crunching in snow, to dazzling sunshine on the beach at Monterey, we danced together like characters in an old musical.

In the back of my head, I expected people around us to find us annoying. I don't know if it was our joy or something else, but people got funny watching us dance.

Some folks just smiled, but sometimes I'd spot somebody crying. I'd signal Amy and the pair of us would rope him or her in and we'd wind up letting them eat a few hours telling us their troubles.

I said eat a few hours because that's really what it was. While every story we heard was different, the need for human connection – some time – was the same. Amy usually wound up inviting these folks over for one of my epic dinners. We made some good friends that way.

Other times, couples would join us. One time, we were dancing at the rest stop on the highway between Manassas and Baltimore. So many couples joined in that I had to drag the banjo out of the car. Amy leaned against my shoulder as I played the banjo and sang old love songs for strangers.

The mini concert ended with us all singing Rainbow Connection together. There was something wild and magical watching total strangers, soccer moms, old coots, and truckers singing a Muppet song together, innocent as children. Guiding these random souls to that happy unguarded moment with Amy leaning against my arm… Well, there are some things words can't describe.

We didn't have a perfect marriage, and we sure as hell didn't get our happy ending, but, my god, we danced.

Both Sides Now

It was raining so hard that I was soaked down to the crack of my ass and I couldn't keep my cigar lit. I was trying to hitch a ride by playing my banjo on the side of the highway.

It was 1985. I had been hiking for miles in the rain. My parents thought I was home safe in bed, but I had climbed out my window into the night with a metal-body dobro guitar and a five-string banjo strapped to my back. I was fifteen years old and on my way to my first paid gig as a musician.

Hitching a ride with my banjo could be tricky. More than once I had been forced to dive out of moving cars, sheltering my instruments with my body, because the guy picking me up kept bringing up the movie Deliverance.

Tonight, I had a roll of nickels in both pockets in case I needed palmers, weights for my fists, in a fight. They were rough but handy weapons – the other guy wouldn't get up, but I'd break my hand. I couldn't risk a knife in case the cops rolled me.

A little sports car speeding by came to a screeching halt in the middle of the highway, coming scarily close to causing a serious accident. This musclebound man with an epic mullet climbed out of the tiny car and started hollering for me to get in.

I managed to fold myself and both instruments and myself into the passenger seat in a single practiced motion and the beefy dude floored it before I could buckle my seat belt.

"That's a banjo, right?" The driver was staring at my banjo and ignoring the road.

I told him it was.

"Thank you, Jesus! Praise God! Praise the Lord!" He gave me a goofy grin and kept on praising the almighty while pumping his fists.

I discreetly got my palmers ready. This dude was built like a pro wrestler and starting to sound and act about as flaky as grandma's homemade biscuits.

I was about to bust the muscle man's jaw and roll out of the moving car, but then he started telling me his story.

He was a male stripper dancing his way through bible college in order to become a Pentecostal preacher.

I stared at the muscles bulging out of his neon pink wife beater and Daisy Dukes. Then I took in the earnest face framed by a mullet so perfect that god must weep when he goes to the barber shop. He wasn't lying. Fuck me.

On this particular night, he had been praying to Jesus all night for a banjo teacher to help him play the old banjo his father gifted him when he left home.

I looked in the back seat. There was a banjo. Holy shit.

I closed my eyes and pondered the life choices that lead to these insane encounters. Jesus wept.

I told him I'd give him a banjo lesson in exchange for the ride, but I teach better on a full stomach.

He took the hint and headed to a diner.

He told me his name, but I lose names like a dryer loses socks. He was the Stripper-Preacher to me. Not like a name is anything but a meaningless label we stick on things to give ourselves the illusion of control anyway.

In the diner parking lot, post cheeseburger, I gave him your standard issue basic frailing banjo lesson. Even as young as fifteen, I had already shared the basics with so many people that this first lesson was almost a performance. A script that had been in place all the way back to the instrument's infancy in ancient Africa.

Every student sees themselves as unique, but the truth is that every student to ever take up the craft started with the same questions, complications, and schemes to con their way around having to practice.

So, as I chewed on a Phillies Titan cigar and went over the basics with the Stripper-Preacher I let my mind wander to the gig I was heading to.

Earlier that day, I was cutting school to hang out in the local music shop.

Now, calling this place a shop was more than generous. It was dirtier than Larry Flint's mind. A literal hole in the wall overstuffed with cheap broken instruments. It was a front. You didn't need Fast Eddie's coaching to see that. Yet, knowing it was a front made hanging out there fun. Also, nobody cared if I needed to swipe a set of guitar strings now and then.

Also, Aunt Mannie's unconditional love had made me rethink the concept of community. Jesus said we are all of one body, so I figured flowing to the low places like water might connect me with the more forgotten parts of my community.

I saw some heavy deals go down. I had strung out musicians cry on my teenage shoulder. I stayed apart from the drug stuff and focused on music.

It turns out focusing on the music was a good thing. The shop had a secret.

By accident or design, the shop was somehow stocked with fabulous cheap guitars made in 1960's Japan.

Now, these were catalog guitars. Cheap knockoffs, sometimes with bodies made out of actual cardboard, sold by Sears and other department stores. To the metalheads hanging out in the shop, these instruments were junk. To old blues players looking for the sounds of Hound Dog Taylor or Elmore James, the funky pickups in these toy guitars were solid gold.

A lot of seasoned blues players came through the shop looking quietly for these rare guitars. I'd be skipping school perched on a broken amp waiting to hit them up for pointers. That's how I got my blues name: Pillsbury. Because I'm pasty white. Started out as a joke. When I got good, it was a token of respect. "Pillz."

So, while the store was completely awful, hanging out there had a crazy way of creating opportunities.

When I was walking into the store earlier that day, cops were peeking in the shop window eyeballing Lefty.

Lefty was the reason I never did drugs.

I waltzed past the police into the store and quietly said "Oink. Oink." to Lefty – who was about to light an improvised bong he crafted from an apple. Like some kind of hellish stoner cub scout project.

The cops stormed in and bounced us around for a while. I was used to it. I had stashed my cigars in my guitar case so there wasn't anything for them to steal. They got jumpy when they found Lefty's Beretta, but he had a permit, and it was Pennsylvania, so it was alright. They just roughed us up a bit and moved on.

Lefty kept eating his apple the entire time.

Anyway, the cops left and Lefty was trying to figure out how to salvage his primitive bong. I was playing banjo and shaking off the cobwebs after getting my head repeatedly banged into the wall by the officers when these Irish guys wander in.

I knew they were Irish. Not because they were dressed like leprechauns. They all had brogues thicker than John Wayne's stools.

They were here to rent out the PA for the gig I would be heading to later that night.

The Heart Within the Art

We started slowly, formally, squaring off face-to-face in the green grass of the summer of 1984 on a little college campus in Wayne, Pa. We each gave the Arnis salute, right hand over the heart with the open left upraised. Then he threw a right back knuckle at my face. I shifted my body, protecting my centerline, while redirecting the strike with my left hand. Then I grabbed his right arm with my left, pulling him in hard as I threw a back knuckle with the right.

After moving through this slowly a few times, Remy started picking up the pace and intensity. I responded in kind, constantly twisting and turning my body while my hands slowly fell into autopilot. My head emptied on its own. My eyes were locked at the center of his body so I could see his hands and feet. Both of us were turning while trying to force an opening, the redirects soft, with the control grip hard as my hands could hold and my counter-punches thrown with calculated abandon.

It was a lot like working a speed bag. To do that, you punch this teardrop-shaped bag hanging from a board. It's on a swivel, so if you don't punch straight, the bag bounces like a cowboy's sack while riding a bucking bronco. You have to hit it square, let the bag bounce, rebound, and you strike again on that rebound. It's hard as hell at first, but over time, you fall into the ease of ease and you find your hands moving impossibly fast while your head is marvelously empty.

It was the same now fighting Remy, but unlike the predictable speed bag, I was also running the risk of getting my face and body punched to a pulp by one of the greatest stick fighters of his generation.

It was all in silence.

Writing this now, more than forty years later and with CTE taxing my brain for the toughness of my youth, I find myself marveling that Remy Amador Presas was my teacher, my mentor, and my friend.

I'm shedding a tear as I think back to how much I loved him, and how I cherish and honor his memory today.

He made me more than a fighter. He made me a teacher. How in the hell did I ever deserve such an honor? I was a punk kid, boiling with rage, and he was an out-of-shape living legend.

Remy had hit the martial arts scene in North America like a bomb. Dean Stockwell had convinced Remy to teach in America after the two had worked together on an absolute turd of a movie called *Philippine Connection*. Remy was the fight coordinator. Dean actually loses a fight to a turban in the film. Not a man wearing a turban, just the fucking turban. I'd say you have to see it, but this is not a so-bad-it's-good schlockfest. This movie will haunt you worse than grandpa's porn stash.

After some brilliant marketing, Remy was in demand everywhere, but fame caught up with him. He gained weight, developed gout, and fell into a funk. He was still teaching, but away from students' eyes, the man moved rough. Kind of like I do now.

For some reason, Remy started showing up at American Martial Arts, where I was training in Ardmore, Pa. I had no idea who he was at the time. He was just this guy who all of the black belts fawned over.

My dad bumped into Remy picking me up one night. Dad asked him if he was an Eskimo. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. Thankfully, Remy just ignored him.

The first time I actually had any contact with Remy other than seeing him hanging around, I was trying to convince one of my instructors to reset my nose for the second time. The pain of that was infinitely more pleasurable than facing my dad after another trip to the ER.

He watched me the whole time—my pleading, Bear's hands, the pain.

Before he grabbed and twisted my nose, Bear, my instructor, shot Remy a look and said, "It'll be okay. Tank's tough."

Remy roughly inspected my nose. It hurt so bad, I blurted out my burning question: "Who the fuck are you anyway?"

He laughed, patted me hard on the shoulder before silently stalking off.

Bear slugged me hard in the stomach, but he didn't say why.

At this time, I was in the karate studio five nights a week training like a man possessed. I only stood five-foot-two and was still wrapped in baby fat, but the discipline and pain of training was my solace. I was fourteen, fighting adults in the ring, and taking far too much punishment.

The karate studio only had classes four nights a week. Thursday nights were reserved for advanced black belts and Bando practitioners.

Those Bando cats were tough and crazy. In order to shadow them to pick up some techniques, I set it up so that I would clean the entire place from stem to stern. Literally shadowboxing with my mop.

One night, I noticed Remy walking out of the men's room. I had already swabbed the toilets and cleaned it top to bottom, but I left some cleaning rags behind.

I walked in and my once beautiful men's room was trashed.

It looked like a shit-bomb had gone off. The toilet was a hazmat scene, there were pistachio shells everywhere, and the stink? It was like Satan himself had been in there cutting the cheese.

I went nuclear. I ran up to Remy and, in front of an astonished group of black belts and Bando fighters, cursed Remy until a fly wouldn't pitch on him.

"Who in the fuck eats fucking pistachios while taking a monster dump and desecrating our place of training? I'll fight you right now, I don't care who you fucking are!"

This went on for some time. Bear in mind, I am from Philadelphia. Obscene and profane language is part of our natural speech patterns. It was only beatings from nuns that kept Catholic school kids from swearing in class. So, as they say in Crisfield, Maryland, I put a motherfucker on him.

Remy was silent the entire time, still munching on pistachios. The expression on his face read as amused curiosity.

After I kicked over my mop bucket in frustration, I finally wound down. The karate studio was silent as the dead save for the sound of Remy chewing loudly on pistachios.

After a moment, Remy poked me hard in the chest and said in an almost unintelligible accent to my deaf ears, "I like you. You're funny."

Then he walked away, never looking back as the black belts and Bando guys descended on me.

I gave as good as I got for a bit, but the Bando dudes hit like freight trains.

After thrashing me for a bit, they explained in profanity- and obscenity-laced terms that Remy was a grandmaster in something called Arnis. He could "spoon shit out of his ass on your clean fucking dojo floor and you can and you fucking will clean it up without saying a word!"

Oh… Oops.

I skipped training on Friday. I didn't want another beatdown.

When I went back on Monday night, I tried to use every bit of my considerable training to get into the locker room unnoticed—but two steps in, my instructor's voice rang out of nowhere: "Costello. Here. Now."

I thought they were going to kick me out. My knees literally knocked and a lump the size of a Buick formed in my throat.

"First, you are an unwashed asshole. Second, Remy has a two-week seminar coming up. It's a thousand bucks a week. You're going. Both weeks."

I stared at him in astonishment. "I don't have that kind of—"

He cut me off. "You're going for free." Then he flashed me an evil smile. "But you'll be cleaning the shitters."

That very day, my teachers switched me from training in Kenpo to something called Modern Arnis. Bear was a student of Remy, and he got it in his head to get me physically and mentally ready for Remy's seminar. "So you don't fucking embarrass us. Again. Asshole."

Modern Arnis, after years of training in Kenpo, was weird as hell. There were basic skills to learn in handling a pair of fire-hardened rattan sticks, but the stances and footwork were left up to me. "Work with what you have." Okay… But how does this work?

"That part is up to you. Trust the process. You'll understand. In time."

The seminar came and… well, I was unprepared for the intensity of it. The seminar was a sea of everything from seasoned black belts to guys learning how to tie a white belt for the first time. The only thing they seemed to have in common was sheer awe of Remy. They called him The Professor for some reason.

All I knew about Remy was that he shit like a rhinoceros. There was a culty kind of vibe in the air.

For the next two weeks, I waited on Remy hand and foot, brought fresh linens to each dorm room, and cleaned every toilet and shower in the place. Then, I took part in the seminars, and in between I trained one-on-one with Remy. When that wasn't happening, I was doing endless calisthenics as punishment for swearing. After two solid weeks of this I think I lost ten pounds.

The group instruction… I was not impressed. Outside of a few things like the ten striking points and *sinawali*—a weaving stick pattern practiced both solo and against an opponent—Remy seemed to have no system. He was constantly throwing new things at us off the top of his head. The clicky-clacky of sticks was loud and impressive, but I was already a seasoned Kenpo fighter. The lack of connective tissue in the lessons stood out to me in stark Fast Eddie terms.

Working one-on-one was an entirely different matter. Because my hearing and his accent made communication difficult, we worked silently. In that setting, the Modern Arnis packaging fell away and we were simply two fighters.

Remy would move slowly so I could grasp the technique he was presenting. Then it was flesh and bone against flesh and bone. We sometimes mixed in single or double sticks, and other times threw a wooden practice knife into the fray.

I got the clicky-clacky stuff down fast. In Kenpo, I got into the habit of drilling the basics until I dropped. I would practice stances until my leg muscles were screaming. I worked the set of Shotokan blocks and punches constantly, focusing on the snap and twists at the end of blocks that turned them into strikes. My form and posture were so strong, throwing some stick twirling into the mix was easy.

What threw me was the fact that the stick and knife stuff was largely performative. In the group classes, the focus was stick on stick. That looks and sounds cool, but won't get you anywhere in a real fight. You have to move in, redirecting or blocking your opponent softly to create an opening on their centerline—and then strike with everything you have and no remorse.

Since Remy was constantly throwing new stuff at us and calling it a system, I had to parse what I could into something usable. I focused on the redirects, in a weird way fighting almost gently—using the redirects to think about why I was being attacked and respond with the love Aunt Mannie had taught me. Riding out an opponent's attack, moving constantly until they tired out just from trying to find a way to hit me. When I did strike, it was merciless and only to end the dance.

After about a year, Remy had me teaching new students the basics, and I was good at that, but my actual fighting style was not Kenpo or Arnis. It was no style at all, and that made Remy happier than a pig in poop.

Teaching the basics to beginners was another lesson for me. Remy was always throwing random lines like "The art within your art"—but I misheard it as "The heart within your art." As such, I was tough on my students, but never cruel. Remy taught me that teaching forces the instructor to rethink every aspect of the thing being presented. Every lesson was double-sided, even for Remy.

Remy eventually had me teach at a couple of seminars. At first, this scared me so bad my asshole would pucker, my hands would shake, and I would fill my speech with verbal placeholders.

After a while, the teaching got easier because I loved sharing with people—even something as vicious as an eye gouge or knife handling. I stood straighter, cursed less, and most of all, I stopped being so goddamned angry.

My parents were initially terrified to find me practicing with machetes in the backyard. Twirling, slashing, and kicking like some dangerous creature, then tossing the blades to dance to Peter Gabriel or DEVO on my obnoxiously loud boombox. Over time, they started to realize the dancing and the fighting were the same to me. They made their peace with it, but mom never stopped noting the hits I was taking. They did not quite understand the strange man who entered their son's life, but they seemed to appreciate that I was both becoming an instructor and getting my shit together.

One time, we were sharing some Jiffy Pop watching *Seven Samurai*. Remy and I took the couch while all of the other students and instructors sat on the floor. Every time Kikuchiyo came onscreen, Remy would slug me in the arm and say, "That's you!"

But the big lesson wasn't stick fighting, toilet cleaning, or even me learning how to teach. I took Remy to my dad's hoagie shop. By then, my parents knew Remy—and were a little afraid of him. Still, Dad was thrilled to have him visit the place. Remy sat down and ate more cheesesteaks than anybody I have ever seen. We are talking Joey Chestnut-level gorging. I was initially horrified, but every time Dad turned back to his grill to make yet another cheesesteak, Remy would point for me to watch him cook.

Then I saw it.

Dad was moving on the grill the way I moved in a fight. I grew up watching the man work, but now, my eyes wide with wonder, I saw my father riding the ease of ease—and I knew the man for the first time.

This is Where I Leave You

She looked at my face for a long time before she said, "You let them change it."

I had to read her lips. I wasn't wearing my hearing aids.

I had just gotten her to stop fussing over preparations for Thanksgiving dinner the next day. She had set the table just so, baked two loaves of bread and two pumpkin pies. I could tell she was tired, but the holiday meant the world to her. I helped her through her chores, then got her into bed with a cup of tea and a slice of her amazing pumpkin pie.

It was a moment, in a lifetime of grand and improbable moments, that I will treasure forever.

So when she mentioned my face, it was more than a shock.

When I gave her a puzzled look, she continued.

"Your face. All of the fighting. It changed your face."

She gave a sad little sigh, closed her eyes, and died in my arms.

There should have been a crash of thunder. Some grand outro for this woman who raised me, fed me poetry, and loved me enough to let me run headlong into the world.

Instead, she was gone.

The ambulance came, then the police, then neighbors swept in to care for my father. So much was happening while this woman, who had once danced with her father to my music, who baked peach kuchens, lay very still.

It was as if the entire world changed in a heartbeat. The house felt like an empty shell. Still, throughout the heartbreak, I took in every moment. Traced the face of every person who stepped up to offer sympathy. The light of my life. Surrendered to stardust.

Goodbyes have a way of creeping up on you. I never know when I am talking to my best friend for the last time.

My mother was one of those people folks would say carried a light with her. Five-foot-two of Pennsylvania Dutch and Irish kindness.

We loved each other, but once I started devouring Dickens, Poe, Frost, Dickinson, and Whitman at the age of six, she got a little scared. I was a puzzle to her in many ways.

The fights were never my choice, even when the other guy honestly deserved it.

Starting with bare-knuckle boxing with my grandfather as a young child, then schoolyard brawls, martial arts training, fights in the ring, getting knocked around by cops, all the way to some godawful street fights that I will not speak of here, my face was transformed over the years by rough hands into something that looked wildly different from my childhood photographs.

I look like one of those cheesy sketches Picasso used to knock out on menus to dodge paying for dinner.

In the world I grew up in, violence was inescapable. From getting my lights punched out by nuns who thought my early reading capacity was something to be snuffed out rather than fostered, to the bad

brawls that cut me deeper than my skin, it seemed like there was always somebody looking to take a swing at me.

I never let them touch my heart.

Oh, I went through some angry phases now and then. But instead of rage, I was really more amused by my opponents. I was always ready and willing, no matter the situation, to put off the fisticuffs in favor of trying to get to know the other person.

The fights always happened, one way or another.

I took it all on the chin.

And until that moment with Mom, I never thought about the wear and tear on my mug. I mean, I knew I was as ugly as homemade soap. I just didn't think anybody cared.

But Mom did.

Every break and tear, every scar on my hands and face, stood out to her. I think Mom and Aunt Mannie felt the injuries more than I ever did.

I would have given anything to spare her that. I hid what I could. It was all I could do.

The thing I couldn't share with mom, what I lack the vocabulary to express is that I accepted the damage. It was the price of admission for the dream I was chasing.

I met an old cut man who, after seeing me knocked down over and over but getting back up, gave me some tips on bringing down swelling and other tricks for patching myself up. He told me, "Tank, you were built to take a punch, with a mouth to match."

After a while, I was able to sneak into the house after karate lessons or other fights and hide as much of the damage as I could. I had a whole setup for medical stuff and to get bloodstains out of my clothes.

Mom never missed a beat. She saw right through it. I could read the heartbreak in her face.

As much as I hated fighting, I loved training. There was also the thrill that came from the poetry of motion. While there are a lot of foolish presumptions out there about what happens in a fight—the shit they show in movies—the old boxers called it a sweet science for a reason.

There can be poetry beyond words, when my body would just move and my head went marvelously empty.

I never fought angry.

Maybe that was the problem.

As much as I hated hurting any living thing, there was something in me that loved the challenge and the grace.

My refuge was words, music, and motion.

Beyond karate, Mom stood silent witness, watching me climb out my bedroom window. A banjo and guitar strapped to my back. Running night after night to play in the worst bars in Philadelphia.

Fifteen years old, coming home in the morning with the stench of the pubs in my clothes and hair.

Everything she wanted and hoped for me was being replaced by my own dreams—and by the discovery that those dreams had value.

The best thing is that I was eventually able to share those dreams with her.

After I started teaching music online, banjo and guitar students from around the world would show up at the door. Mom took them in like family, and they all seemed to love her as much as I did.

When my parents celebrated their fortieth anniversary, an international gang of my students took over the occasion.

My parents marched to renew their vows, led by a Scottish piper, beneath a saber arch of banjos, with a Lutheran pastor from Pennsylvania and a slightly drunk Anglican priest from London doing the omminy-gomminy things.

Best of all, Carlos was there with his father. My Spanish brother. Wow.

To add to the festivities, one of my students from Crete somehow mailed us two old Fanta bottles. One was filled with fresh olive oil from his garden. The second was filled with home-brewed Raki. Lion's milk. Stronger than moonshine. We toasted the bride and groom drinking from our bottleneck slides – and that stuff hit like a hammer. Whoo.

I caught the bouquet. So, I guess it wasn't a coincidence that Amy came along a year later.

None of this was my idea. I was off to the side crying with joy. My students wanted to do this for her on their own.

As a huge German guitar player explained patiently to me, "Let us do this for her. For you."

As a teacher, I was honor-bound to let them use what I had taught them.

They don't talk about that in self-help bullshit.

I have found that sometimes, no matter the discipline, that being a teacher requires me to occasionally hold one arm behind my back. To trust the lesson more than my desire to show off. Teach as a servant, with no goal beyond letting my students fly.

Yeah, Mom. They changed my face. I changed their hearts.